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THE SHORT STORY

Edited by MANJERI S. ISVARAN

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CONTENTS

		Page
Editorial	The Whispering Gallery	336
M. Chalapathi Rau	At the Kutb	338
Mannar Kadamby	When the Gods Revenge	345
Manjeri S. Isvaran	In Mufti	355
A. Ramiah	Flowers & Crotons	360
L. S. Ramamritam	Bapuji	363
T. J. Ranganathan	The Miracle	370
Rajendra Prasad Saksena	Draupadi's Sari	375
	In the Book World	379

The sketches from Mahabalipuram are by Mr C. Sivaramamurti.

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The Whispering Gallery of Life & Letters

(This section is devoted to Editorial Comments on current topics of interest)

The truly great
Have all one age, and from one visible place
Shed influence. They, both in power and act,
Are permanent, and Time is not with them,
Save as it worketh for them, they in it.—

COLERIDGE

It is in the highest degree unphilosophic to call language or diction the dress of our thoughts . . . It is the incarnation of our thoughts.—

WORDSWORTH

The Late Mr Greenhough Smith, Editor of "The Strand Magazine"

'IT may be said that with the immense number of existing monthlies there is no necessity for another. It is believed, however, that *The Strand Magazine* will soon occupy a position that will justify its existence. The past efforts of the Editor in supplying cheap, healthful literature have met with generous favour from the public that he ventures to hope that this new enterprise will prove a popular one.' So wrote Mr George Newnes in the first number of *The Strand*, January 1891, following the tremendous success of *Tit-Bits*, and the man who was responsible for the "new enterprise" was Mr H. Greenhough Smith who edited *The Strand* for forty years (he retired from active editorship five years ago) and died at the age of eighty, on January 14th, 1935. Everybody knows the popularity and the high position of *The Strand* in the magazine-world but few know Mr Greenhough Smith who gave his whole life to the journal, discovering young writers, encouraging them in their work, and himself, silent, retiring, and shunning all publicity. Conan Doyle was the first to write a story for the very first number of the magazine and thereafter to delight the world with his marvel of a creation, Sherlock Holmes; H. G. Wells, W. W. Jacobs, J. M. Barrie, A. E. W. Mason, W. Somerset Maugham, Arnold Bennett, P. G. Wodehouse, Warwick Deeping—names famous in the literary world to-day—are all in the grand array of the Strand authors; Mr Smith was untiring in his search for new writers of ability and genius. And thus ever encouraging and sympathetically judging others, he wrote very little himself; a few short stories and essays, a novel entitled *Castle Sombras* are all his literary output. Of the essays brought together in one of "John O' London's Little Books" and called *Odd Moments*

he says very modestly in the preface that if they should fail to please the reader 'the fault is altogether mine since it has been my pleasant task to deal, for the most part, with the works of the world's great masters in the art of letters, the creators of the things of beauty that are a joy for ever.'

This, about H. G. Wells, from the section "Authors I Have Known" shows how frank, discerning, and sure of his judgment he was :—

> 'Of H. G. Wells I may say that, of all the authors I have met, he is the most unimpressive at a casual glance, and the most impressive on a close acquaintance. No one would turn round to look after him in the street; but it is impossible to talk to him for five minutes without seeing that he is a man of the most striking gifts. Whatever subject may be started his face brightens, his keen eyes sparkle, and his lips pour fourth a stream of vivid speech, giving, most often, a view of things which is quite new, original, and his own. One would suppose that he could dictate his work to a shorthand-writer as fast as he could talk. But no; that does not suit him. Every word is written in his small clear, pretty hand, with incessant alterations, and margins covered with "balloons" of script, to be inserted here and there. When he is not working he is playing hard. Everybody knows the "war-game" which he invented for his own little sons. To see him playing hockey on his own lawn is to see a child in full enjoyment of the game in the midst of other children.'

Words from the heart, clear, simple, and shining in their dignified remoteness. In simplicity and in remote dignity Mr Greenhough Smith lived and died; like the plume of a peacock, soft and luminous, his name lies in repose between the pages of the literary history of England for nearly fifty years.

Mr Fisher Unwin

DEATH has occurred of Mr Thomas Fisher Unwin, founder of the well-known Publishing House bearing his name. Leaving school he worked for twenty years in a London Publishing firm before he went into business for himself in 1882. He was also the joint founder of the first Council of the Publishers' Association, and the First Committee of the Friends of Russian Freedom, Chairman of the Political and Economic Circle, National Liberal Club, and Governor of the London School of Economics. He was the discoverer of Joseph Conrad; started the famous "Mermaid" series of old dramatists. He was a son-in-law of Richard Cobden and was eighty-seven years old when he died.

A New G. B. S.

MR Bernard Shaw has written a new play—"The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles"—for next summer's Malvern Festival. Before it will be given its first British presentation at the Festival, writes a correspondent in the *Daily Herald*, it will be seen in New York, with Lawrence Grossmith, the actor-brother of George Grossmith, in a leading part. Other principals include Romney Brent and Alla Nazimova, the star of silent films.

Rupert Brooke, Poet

THE Greek Government has given away a sum of £ 20 "for the upkeep and restoration of the tomb of Rupert Brooke, poet," on the island of Skyros. The rich dead are to be kept richer.

A Pepys Discovery

TWO new Pepys Diaries have been discovered among the papers he left to Magdalene College, Cambridge. They deal with political rather than social life, in the period following the end of the diaries we are familiar with.

At THE KUTB

By

M. CHALAPATHI RAU

What were they seeing, those men near the minar who stood gazing into eternity? Black magic, uttermost devilry . . . a deed of dreadful note

THE road that runs from Delhi to Taghlakabad is one of those roads which never seem to end. It lunges through eternity, while time stands sombre and frost-bitten. I gasped at the wilderness of no man's tombs on either side of the road, memorials to man's feud with man; and smelt the blood of heroes which had blossomed into dust. We were going to the very heart of romance; and the road that led to it seemed to me more dreamy and haunting than the golden road to Samarkand.

'This is a road without end,' I said, sitting next to the driver. That is a position which I would always attain even if it involved me in petty wars. Doluram was to my left, and he had put on his reverie, seeming to ponder but really anticipating the day's experience and poetizing in advance.

'This is the golden road to Samarkand!'

'You have begun,' boomed Jalal from behind, referring to my endless chatter. Nazarulla was with him; he was one of those leaden-eyed incorrigibles who attach themselves to any party and form the intellectual black sheep.

'. . . . wash-out like the Jama Masjid,' Jalal was saying something; but the ultra-macaronic bombination of the engine came in between us.

'What?' I enquired turning back.

'The Kutb will be another disappointment.'

The women-folk, the variegated northern indian women-folk, did most of the talking behind us.

The bus trundled on like a mastodon among pre-historic ruins. We had passed New Delhi which hovered in the distance, a glittering salute to the gaunt and bloody past. Car-loads of fantastic beings, bohemian-bodied men and women, with tired and frustrated faces, were passing us from the opposite side, loudly hurraing; and it seemed they were imaginary beings, fawns and goat-foot satyrs, transferred from one end of eternity to the other. We were utter strangers to those pale-white pink-white faces; but our eyes, I thought, were familiar and kindled with immemorial fires.

The road without end seems to linger for a while at Taghlakabad. The village, born out of the crust of the earth, is a wildered cemetery, the shady dreaming-place of sultans, and the poor man's ghost of paradise, one of those bits of land's end, primeval and deathless, echoing with dead men's feet, watered by dead men's blood, beyond the pale of this life and death.

We were faced by the birdless silence, no wind even; there were little clusters of pallid, pouting, hypnotic faces, with something wise and ancient in their evil-suggesting eyes, and a leer between their carmine lips; a few ugly urchins making unnatural gestures; and famished dogs indulging in vigorous winter whoopee. And we saw asudden the Kutb Minar, the resting place of sun and moon and stars, a column of fire out of which a phœnix had renewed itself, not time-worn like the ghosts of Shajahanabad, but an ever-lasting thing, roaring with life.

Then there was a war-time bustle; and men ran about and hid themselves behind trees and broken walls; and a wild woman came from somewhere, with wizened bramble hair and maddened eyes, singing I know not what and dancing round and round, and throwing her basket of fruit and pots and flowers at the terrified men, and cursing them, and calling them for battle, thumping her half-naked ribs, like a bull bewildered and infuriated, charging her mocking matadors. And then she vanished somewhere, and the men came out of their hiding places and it all seemed like the visitation of an enraged houri.

'Guide, Sa'eb.' 'Guide.' 'Guide.' We were beset by a small crowd of natives, looking like dervishes in an Arabian Night's Story, and bringing fraternal greetings from another world.

There could be none so raucous as those guides—they were more like animated cartoons than like men, and one of them had eyes which shone like glow-worms. (The evil spirits, it might be said, would be born as guides in Delhi if they are not born as hounds in hell). He waved like a magician, and did not speak much, like the others; clad in bedouin-rags, with a sprawled and cobwebby beard, a tattered tarboosh on his head; his face was harrowed and his gait unsubstantial; there was the glow-worm's haunted glow in his eyes. He spoke in hollow tones, in the manner of a bird, alternating between a screech and a song, and his whole being echoed whenever he spoke. His brow was prayerful like that of a *muezzin*.

Jalal interpreted him delightfully. I took an undue interest in him, the same that I take in all outlanders.

'What is your name?' asked Jalal.

'Don't ask my name, Sa'eb. It is anything, it is nothing.' I thought he might be Sindbad, the Sailor. We asked him about the wild woman. He told an interesting story.

'It is a strange case, Sa'eb. Kutbuddin belonged to the house of Timur. He married her against the wish of his kinsmen. They said she was a witch. Kutbuddin loved her for her singing, and made her sing all day and night, and often in these far-away places under the moonlight. But the fates changed their minds. She became mad and killed her child as soon as it was born. Kutbuddin would not leave her. But what could he do, Sa'eb? He had to run for his life. She has vowed to kill him also; and she comes once a day from the neighbouring villages in search of Kutbuddin.'

'There must be some reason for her madness. Kutbuddin might have ill-treated her.'

'No, Sa'eb.'

'How do you know?'

'I knew Kutbuddin, Sa'eb. And very intimately too.'

'Where is Kutbuddin now?' I asked.

'He is hiding here itself, and often at nightfall he sleeps on the top of the Kutb. They think it is a fancy but it is Kutbuddin.'

'Does she not seek him there?'

'No, Sa'eb.'

'Why not he kill her?' suggested Doluram.

Sindbad appeared thoughtful. 'But he loves her too much, Sa'eb. He will not kill her.'

'Has he no help?'

'He prefers to live alone. There is a curse on the house of Timur. He knows it. He will not try to break it. There is another thing, Sa'eb. Some say she turned mad because Kutbuddin committed adultery. It is not true.'

I had a brain-wave. I thought our guide himself might after all be Kutbuddin. It was worthy of Sherlock Holmes; but it appeared fantastic and I liked him to be Sindbad, the Sailor.

'But what is wrong with adultery?' declared Nazarulla. Our guide mumbled something. Jalal was not able to translate it. I pressed him. 'He speaks King's Urdu, and I do not know much of it, he said. I thought how adultery, whoredom, lust, gluttony, pride, and patricide had sown their dragon's teeth and grown up into a infinite kaleidoscope.

A european gentleman and lady were admiring bits of ancient architecture. We saw our old friends, the tiny gods, in inconvenient postures, like drunken men satiating themselves in a brothel and achieving nirvana. I was not interested in this jargon of stone, this race of by-gone men, pornographic allegories and relics anticipating to illustrate Havelock Ellis. I was gazing intently at the blinding renaissance wrought by the sun on the minar. It was like a tower of roses. Every grain of the surface of red sandstone sparkled and shone like powdered rubies. I was

eager to mount up its steps and reach emptiness.

We could not keep pace with the guide. We lingered panting at the windows. At one place we came upon a fierce-looking Afghan and were frightened; at another place we took a carnivorous interest in the corpulence of a bevy of beautiful-faced Kashmiri girls. There was fragrance in that darkness. We felt like encaged tigers; trying to attain touch but groping darkly among the tintinnabulating bangles and eyes that twinkled. At last we came up. 'From darkness into light,' I murmured.

The horizons went bounding into the distance. There was no sign of life or death, but only stillness and a drab scene. Here, I thought, were the waste lands of the world, the barrenness of creation, undulating beyond the horizons. A fairy-like figure fluttered up the steps, humming golden laughter, followed by a smart-looking mollycoddle. 'Ha ha ha!' said the fairy, humming golden laughter. 'Hi hi hi!' said the mollycoddle. 'Ha ha ha hi hi hi!' The pair dived down and disappeared. The european couple were sitting in the distance under a tree; they had adopted half-hearted nudism under the heat of the noonday sun, drawing towards each other, close-fisted, a little carnally, tickling their flesh, their physiques lying like parts of a jig-saw puzzle waiting for a solution. Jalal was quick with his camera.

I did not want to go down. Nazarullah and Doluram were eager to follow the guide. 'There are many more things, Sa'eb.' I felt I was rooted to the soil, as firm and magnificent as the tower on which I sat. I almost feel shy of writing how I wanted to stay there and live like a dreamer—for days, for years, perhaps for ever; grow a beard and become a god or satyr and dance among the tombs; plant a small garden of eden and dwell with my naked eyes; found a religion or solve the riddle of the sex. I did not move. I was incarnating into a mad philosopher. The others had gone down. 'Come, Sa'eb, come. There are more things down there. I must get away before it is evening.' I could not resist him. His eyes fascinated me with their glow-worm's molten gold.

'What are you aiming at?' asked Jalal, when we were at the foot of the mighty minar.

'I am looking for gipsies. That is the only touch wanting here.' Ever since my childhood I have thought of gipsies as perfumed forest-flowers, as carnations among men. There were no gipsies. There were a kind of beautiful women, laughing and frisking about in a dream fugue. I have seen more beautiful women all over the country, women that have combined body and spirit in flower-like figures, women that can beat the pot-boiled beauties of Hollywood for grace and beauty. But there was something peculiar about the women that gambolled at the Kutb. They had haunted faces, lips that commemorated all the roses in the world, voices like that of water, feet that were capable of fluttering.

We were lost among the tombs. There was no end to them. Sindbad let loose his tongue. He identified every tomb and told a story about it. I liked to tease him, and he told us more stories.

'This is only one of the Delhis, Sa'eb. If you dig it up, you will find a hundred more.'

'Delhi is a dusty nothing,' said Doluram.

I had enraptured myself; I uttered profundities. 'No, it is the immemorial tomb celebrating the doom of empires. The history of civilization is the history of god's dissipation of man. This earth is composed of sultans dying in the red flush of wine and sultanas murdered in their sleep.'

We were feeling utter strangers. Our guide was babbling, but we had begun to dream. We were unreal. We had walked abruptly into a world, where tombs had eyes and ears, where trees murmured half-mysteriously, and worms had established their empires. We were thinking of only one thing,

the most tragic fact on earth, death; and yet we could not speak of it. We were dreamers who had forgotten to dream in the place of tombs. Whose tombs were they? Some unknown fanatics, ministers of emperors who thundered across the land, servants, damsels who must have been beautiful beings made of fire and air and breathing like ourselves. We kicked about us to show our contempt for dead men. Then we became thoughtful and reverent.

Tombs! Thy belonged to nobody, yet somebody lurked behind every one of them, peeping with their pairs of dead men's eyes. We passed on. Not a tree or stump of tree. We walked as though we were the owners of those graves. The dust would not murmur of its proud boast, its entombed beauty and wisdom.

We swerved back to the road. The trees and the arid road seemed as ancient as the earth itself; and the earth was lying like an ageless mummy, drowning itself its darkest memories, giving away nothing of its mystery, telling us no tales about the things it had known, the rankest spy, knowing so many scandals, ceremonies, courts, battles, whoredoms. I wished I could laugh at it in contempt. It seems to envelop us all in its spell. We grew from its nether womb. We live on its fat and dung. We speak its airs and sing its songs. Yet only the gods can know of its life. And perhaps not even they.

'It must be horrible to come here at night.' I ventured to break the spell.

'Horrible, Sa'eb? Very very horrible. You could hear the tigers bark and the water of the Jumping Wells sing and moan.'

We stopped at the Jumping Wells of Raziya, and looked dreamily at the dark waters descending to unknown depths. My eyes warmed with ecstasy. I saw a kingly sultana, riding a white palfrey, dressed in shining taffeta trousers and a taut emerald-coloured bodice burdened with pearls from Khorassan and Ormuz, with a golden dagger at her waist. The water was leprous and as ghasthy as her fate. We threw coins in those wells, and the lads there made bold plunges and rose up from the whirling water holding the coins with their teeth.

'Here Raziya sultana bathed daily, and the wells, Sa'eb, in her time were filled with the attar of roses.'

'Tosh,' ejaculated Jalal, 'do not listen to these old wives' tales.'

But I had a mind to listen for ever. I thought how Raziya, she of whom Firishta wrote that she had a man's head and heart, went fighting to meet her fate. I encouraged the guide to chatter to me. I did not know his language, but I could guess what he was driving at; and the two of us strayed from the company for a while.

'This is the tomb of Sher Shah, Sa'eb.' It was rough and cracked at every point; and it was the farthest point in Golgotha, the place of skulls. The wilderness seemed to start and have its being there. It was a far cry to the Kutb. I was wearied and sat on a stone; and I did not know how long I sat there, musing, musing how it was better to stay in the place of tombs, away from the sulphur of life, in that peaceful suburb, where one was allowed to breathe and dream and roam about, where nothing is hurried, not even death, where there is a life, only with its beauty, its placid murmurous beauty, its vacuity which is true annihilation, its great beyond which is real peace.

It was evening, and the guide, I thought, was at his evening prayers. I looked for him. He was not to my right, nor to my left. I saw him prostrating at some distance behind me; and when he raised his neck it was empty—no head on it, not a hint of his beautiful *muezzin's* face. I could have put an end to myself from the sheer fright of it. I have never believed in the truth of ghosts or dreams, but there, at that time of dusk, I was witness to black magic and uttermost devilry. I sought the aid of my senses, but they refused to move. It was, I realized, the beginning of doomsday for this

'Before we could understand what was happening she flung herself on our guide and stabbed him twice.'

world; and when I turned my eyes again to the headless guide, his head was in its natural place. He was coming with a grin towards me. I did not talk to him, but hastened to join my companions.

'I must get home, Sa'eb. It is almost night time.'

I was cashier of the company and paid him a rupee. He would not take it. He said it was too little for his five or six hours' work. The only work he had done was to talk all the time. Jalal took the hint and told him as much. He would not budge. There

was terror in his eyes. He glowered fiercely.

'I must be paid, Sa'eb.'

We had a last look at the Kutb, rising like a pillar of cloud in the dusk. A bus was half-empty. We boarded it with the guests of Chicago gunmen.

'Sa'eb!'

A lozenge-eyed maiden was sitting in a coach, enchanted in a reverie, absorbed in her delicate dove-like hands and her glass bangles and fingers that tapered like the petals of roses.

'Roshanara!' I said agonizingly and we watched her movements amorously.

'Start,' said the driver, but the cleaner in sooty trousers lay dozing for more passengers. The second bus was starting. The lozenge-eyed damsel sat enchanted in her reverie, looking at her dove-like hands.

'Honk!' The second bus lunged forward. The cleaner in sooty trousers hawed, and rose up looking at the horizon.

'Sa'eb!' clamoured the guide. I can still remember his harrowed face. He did not speak much, but he was menacing. I did not compromise.

'Let us get down,' threatened Doluram.

'Start,' said the driver. The lozenge-eyed beauty was staring at us from the centre of her enchanted eyes.

'Sa'eb!' cried the guide plaintively. I did not move. The cleaner in sooty trousers was starting the engine.

'Kutbuddin! Kutbuddin! Kutbuddin!' It is a haunting cry. The wild woman, whom we had almost forgotten, came rushing by the side of the trees to our left, and before we could understand what was happening she flung herself on our guide and stabbed him twice. He coiled and fell. She ran away frantically. We raised him up, but he could not stand it. There was an intense uproar. Our guide, whom we had come to love and whom we had failed to understand, lay there dying among us. The crowd increased. The lozenge-eyed beauty sat disturbed in her reverie, looking at us. The moon and stars were holding rendezvous on the top of the minar.

He died. 'Sa'eb, I am Kutbuddin.' They were his last words.

The bus throttled, trembled, chafed, hummed, yawned, lunged forward in the darkness.

'If all these tombs would gape open and yield up philosophers like Kutbuddin!' I reflected.

'Kutbuddin was a fool,' said Jalal. He was courting fate, or he must be a monster. To have such eyes!'

'No. There was nothing abnormal about him. He only belonged to the more lurid side of life. But what I cannot understand is how he could tuck away his head.'

We left behind us the other end of eternity, haunted faces, tombs that had eyes and ears, trousered sultanas, tigers that barked and waters that sang at midnight, worms that were the only things and Silence which was the only owl that sat and ululated there; and before we could realise what was real and what was unreal we regained the beginning of the road that never ends.

WHEN the GODS REVENGE

By MANNAR KADAMBY

BORANNA was determined to send his son to the school. He declared that he had done the silliest mistake in having listened to the women and put it off for such a long time. It should have been four years by now if he had sent him when he first thought of it. His wife protested and argued that nothing could be more criminal than sending such a tender boy to any school, and that too a bunglee-eschool. One might wonder what a bunglee-eschool is, but it is one of those local names which evolve themselves from their immediate environments. This particular name bunglee was the metamorphosed form of bungalow because the school was the only Mangalore-tiled house in the village. Of course, one need not be told that eschool is easier to pronounce than its original. This very name bunglee-eschool meant, as most of such local names mean, many things. Most of the villagers were convinced that it was primarily started by the white man to convert the young boys to Christian faith. Whether this belief was founded on actual facts, is a different matter. The school suffered under a strange public antipathy, and for a standing of six years, it had a strength of twelve students. Even they were dwindling away as some of them gave out the grotesque details of the new forms of punishment of the white man. These were the reasons which made the good woman, Boranna's wife, protest strongly to send her son to that school. Even to-day when Boranna was determined to send his son, she dared to oppose him and as a final resort warned that the young child would merely learn to blaspheme the very gods and disgrace the noble forefathers who were in heaven. Dasappa, the young boy who was the cause of so much discussion watched the issue eagerly and prayed with all his young devotion that his mother might win and he might be saved from that horrible school. Indeed, such bad prospects delivered with such vehemence and by his loving wife, would have deterred Boranna, if he had not experienced a humiliation during his recent visit to the taluk, Chamarajanagar. The incident responsible for his resolution to bring education to his home, is worth recalling only to show that a father's experiences and prejudices often decide the future of the son. Boranna went to the Government hospital at Chamarajanagar to seek relief for his aching tooth. He stood at a respectful distance from the doctor and requested his attention many times but still failed to move him. To his exasperation, each time he requested, the doctor seemed to be even more deeply absorbed in his book. At this moment a young boy came and wished the doctor a 'good morning' and sat in a chair proffered to him. Boranna simply forgot his toothache in his rage. He hurried away from the hospital immediately. And all the way home he thought of the insult, now with more of vexation than anger. What a sad mistake he had done to go the hospital. He, grey-haired Boranna and owner of sixteen acres of garden to be insulted before a boy who was a nobody and as young as to be his grandson! What could he do now? How could he repay the doctor? He realised painfully that he was powerless. Perhaps, if he were able to harm the doctor in some way, his anger would have spent itself in that retaliation. But now his attentions turned towards his son. Was it not because the boy spoke English that he was offered a seat? In his new frame of mind, English language possessed a remarkable power—in fact, it seemed the only key to respect.

So, the very next morning the local astrologer got busy with numerous calculations of the various planetary aspects and ultimately fixed up an auspicious day for Dasappa to be initiated in the art of learning. However, to nullify an evil aspect of a particular

planet and to protect the young pupil from any future evil, a customary sacrifice of a fat lamb to the Diety was offered that night. And the priest, who was whispered in terror throughout the village to possess direct communion with the Diety, congratulated Boranna with great complacence because Mariamma—he swore to its truth—blessed Dasappa with a maternal smile. A rare and extremely fortunate blessing and it foretold a great future to the devotee. Needless to say that he received an extra coin in silver.

According to a letter, the village padre's wife wrote to her sister, the village was the last spot on the face of the earth for a human being to live. 'They call it Siridadadalli, my dear,' she wrote. 'How queer I feel spelling it! It is a godforsaken place where nothing happens. I shall write to you an interesting note about the name. To the natives a name is a very important thing and a good name is one which suggests all qualities and surroundings—the more suggestive the better. And this particular name is said to have been evolved from its surroundings and it is supposed to tell a lot of its own history, though it would be puzzling to trace them. The village was—a long time ago, they say—a group of a score of small huts on the bank of the tiny stream, Suvarnavati—another name to tax you, darling, and it literally means gold. Not that the stream brings any gold though she bears innumerable shining dots of mica on her sandy bed. In very truth, a legend runs that all the mica, called crow's gold in their native tongue, was actually gold and her present state is the result of a saint's curse who found the stream too arrogant in refusing to yield him deep water for his morning ablutions. As if the narrow ribbon of water could understand and obey him! They do say that all the holy rivers obey the holy saints. There are such queer things, my dear. And if you stay in India for long you will come to know some more that may be worse. When I told an English-knowing Brahmin that all these sounded absurd, he was not beaten back but gave quite another ingenious explanation. The river has her name, he told me very seriously, because she deposits a thick film of fine alluvial soil on the banks which is responsible for the bountiful harvests, and bountiful harvests mean more gold. A clever justification that! So the name of the village is a combination of three words which mean a village of gold on the bank of a gold river. But contradictory to its meaning the village is a mile off the stream. This is also explained in a way. In monsoons, the little stream swelled enormously like any other southern river and drowned many of the helpless huts. Thus at each monsoon the little group moved away from the destructive water, till one year it moved a mile off in sheer disgust of slow motion and to be absolutely beyond the reach of the devouring stream.'

The taluk head-quarters, Chamarajanagar—with due acknowledgments to another of her letters—was on the other side of Suvarnavati and there was nothing of a bridge which connected the two banks. It was impossible to cross the swollen stream in the rainy season and dangerous to ford her when she was not in floods. The village seemed to feel nothing of this want of communication and there were many people who had not seen anything beyond this village and its common in the whole of their life time.

Yes, nothing did really happen in Siridadadalli. And when Boranna sent his thirteen-year-old son to the school instead of sending him to the garden, the village had quite a stir. It afforded enough excitement to last for months and whenever two people met—they could not help meeting since every man had to pass through the same street to reach his bit of land and every woman had to fetch water from the one well which was at the end of the same street—they immediately fell in to discuss the Boranna affair and sometimes indulged in a sort of speculative guess about the future of Dasappa. Some said that Boranna was becoming weaker every day as a result of overexerting himself in the garden single-handed. It was

foolish to have sent away a grown-up lad to idleness and wickedness only to overwork himself in his old age. Others said that it was the mental worry caused by the constant bickerings at home that had weakened him. There were many versions for the cause of these quarrels which were surely undermining the old man's strength. Some were of the opinion that it was his wife; others again swore that it was the son. Dasappa was certainly changed after he became the student of the bungleeeschool. It happened as the mother had always warned. He showed the worst disrespect to his parents and openly disgraced his forefathers. He threw away all the earthen pots calling them filthy. Were all his forefathers filthy? They wondered how Boranna tolerated all his impudence and arrogance. Anyhow, the gossip was not starved even by a space of three years nor would it ever have starved as a matter of fact by any length of time. As it was, only a fresh incident gave more food and the gossip flared even higher. It was customary for the Boranna family to sacrifice a yearly toll of two lambs to Mariamma. One at the boundary stone towards the stream to make the river remain always beyond the village and the other was, well, a purely family matter. Boranna bought two hatchets when as a youth of twenty he entered to active garden work. But that very night he dreamt a dream in which his great Mariamma demanded of him both hatchets or at least one of them and an yearly sacrifice of one fat lamb, in default of which, She warned him sternly before disappearing, the hatchet shall take human blood instead. All along for years and years these two were faithfully fulfilled. But this year Dasappa refused to supply the lambs. This roused the animism of the villagers to such an excited protest that they immediately gathered under the shady banyan tree to discuss the matter. When the tom-tom of the rustic drum went round and called every villager to his duty, Boranna put up a final effort to convince his son of his foolhardiness.

'Look here, my son, I have maintained the tradition for forty years. Can we ever oppose the almighty Mariamma? No, my lad, for all the padre might say our religion for us and their religion to them. We cannot be like them, for all the padre might say.'

'All that he says,' Dasappa replied, 'is that it is a sin to kill two harmless lambs to bribe god. Again, father, you still believe that this hatchet possesses life? It cannot be true and that much you must agree.'

'You would never have doubted me or Mariamma,' 'the old man's voice quivered. 'You or your padre would have shook with fear at the sight of our Mariamma as she appeared to me. Oh, I wish you had seen her. It is sheer . . . well, we will all be destroyed if we disobey Her command. This hatchet has served me all these years, I have been never without it. You must worship it and guard it as I have done. It is Her personal gift to our family. You must honour it more than the twelve acres of land that I gave you. Do you understand, my son? Ah, I forgot. You said that the padre called the holy sacrifice a sin. I shall tell you something in answer to that. There is an old proverb that no man can see his own back—much truth in it. For all the padre might say, he cannot see his own sin. Don't you know, my lad, that he kills one of his flock every week to satisfy his hunger? Is it not a greater sin?'

'Yes, father, I have asked him even that. I was inquisitive and we have talked it over many times. It is not so much the killing that he objects but the falseness of the motive. While it is very well to satisfy hunger why clothe it in a religious garb and make god appear cruel when he is not. Also it is unreasonable to assert that a hatchet has life, or by offering a lamb to that metal lamp Mariamma will be pleased.'

'Oh, my Mariamma! What a calamity! I am justly punished for having sent you to that eschool. What a bad day, my own son, to blacken my name! Well, I am lost—lost because of you. My lad, may I,' his old voice was hollow as if it came from a deep well, 'may I

beg of you not to disgrace me. Save me from this shame. Oh, what a bad day, I to beg my own son!'

Dasappa was vexed. He had not seen his old father in such deep grief. Nor had he any idea of the importance of the devotional bounds he was overstepping. The old man was silent now but his breath came and went quickly. Dasappa refrained from talking for a while to keep back the lump in his throat. He had inherited the emotional heart of his father. The distant thrum—thrum of that drum was incessant and seemed to pound his heart.

'I only wanted to test its truth, father,' he said at last. 'I never knew that you looked at it with such a dread or you believed in it so strongly. Honestly, I did not want to go against you. Now tell me that I have not punished you—that I have not disgraced you.'

The aged father heaved a deep sigh of relief and said gratefully, 'My son, I am saved—I am so glad! You are good to me, you were always that, my treasure. Come, let me feel your wise head.'

Dasappa obeyed silently. And after a few minutes he asked permission to go to the panchayat at the banyan tree. The son was sent with benedictions. 'Go, my child and behave yourself as Boranna's son. Nothing but good can come out of good.'

Dasappa met the hushed gaze of his villagers unflinchingly. His schooling had given him enough courage and straightforwardness to enter into the point without any lengthy preamble.

'I know why you have assembled here. Let me tell you that you shall have the two lambs.' After a pause, when a murmur was beginning to break the silence, he resumed. 'But I want each one of you to understand that I am not a victim of wrong teaching. I am perfectly aware of my move. I wanted merely to test the truth of a superstition. I only hope, my Mariamma will give me a chance. Yes, She is mine just as much as She is yours. I worship Her in the same way as you do. And don't think that you have terrified me into this submission. My only opinion is that you may be under a wrong spell as you are about the school yonder. I assure you that I found none of the tyrannical punishments that I was misled to expect there. It is wrong to set afloat such rumours. Well, to think the padre capable of harming boys! You will all like him if you only give him a chance to help you.'

He hurriedly left them and went to his garden to think. Had not the padre told him that truth shall only be revealed to the courageous? But why had he given up when he had a splendid chance? Yes, it was his father. Oh, if he could only get another chance that would not wound his father! He gazed at the hatchet for a long time. It seemed absurd to attribute to that sharp edge human characteristics and a vindictive nature of taking blood as a penalty. True, it could cut and gash when some external animating force was supplied to it. But could it act with self-volition? No, no—it was preposterous to think that it had any life. The more he gazed at the metal blade the more he thought it worth any experiment to test the truth. But he must be quick. Perhaps, even now as he lay there thinking, one of the lambs was being taken to the sanctuary border-stone. That very night he was to kill—the other. He remembered that while the former lamb was the sacrifice made by all the villagers, the second was entirely his family matter. 'Yes, that is a splendid idea,' he almost exclaimed, 'I shall persuade my old father to remain and rest at home while I go alone to the altar. It works admirably. It is very easy to show blood on the hatchet, now that one lamb is dead. Who shall doubt my sacrifice?' He smiled, pleased with his own plan and in his eagerness to see the consequences, was totally unaware of the deceit involved in its working.

After six days of melancholy brooding and five sleepless nights, Dasappa

became suddenly aware of some invisible yet definite presence of an evil spirit hovering about him. He felt extremely discomforted. In spite of his efforts to dispel all fear, he could not forget the menacing look that seemed to haunt him. That evening he experienced a strange and more tangible proof of the evil which set at nought every one of his hopes of any deliverance from fear. He was returning from his work carrying the hatchet on his shoulders and holding its wooden handle with his left hand. He heard footsteps, vague whispers, and drifting sighs. The hooting of the owls was music to him now and he welcomed it so that he might escape these mysterious sounds. How he longed for a quiet rest free from this hell! Once when the footsteps loudly sounded, he summoned all his courage and swerved round suddenly to see nothing but an inky mass of the murmuring foliage. And while turning round he was conscious—he could swear to it—of the hatchet being pulled up with a jerk. No, it was not the force of gravity; it was not like a heavy thing falling down by its own weight; the thing was definitely pulled up. It unnerved him. He shrieked in a shrill shaky voice, 'Is there any one here?' The cloudless starry sky answered him with a sudden flash of blinding light, followed by a clap of thunder rumbling the very earth. He collapsed. Hours later he found himself on his legs and a short way home met his alarmed parents.

Now he felt certain of being pursued. He was only a fugitive, not the fugitive trying to evade the feeble search of a few police but he was attempting the impossible task of hiding from the All-seeing Mariamma. How could any one escape Her searching eye? Was is not wiser to confess everything and try to win Her by some atonement? Still he did not want to reveal what happened to him and followed his parents silently even though the anxious mother poured questions on him. When a brief interval came, the father said, 'I was very much worried because of that lightning, my child. It is very strange,' he continued looking at the countless twinkling signals of the sky as if for the first time, 'that such a sky should visit us with lightning. It must have shocked you.'

Dasappa remained silent, thanking his father for his logical guess. He admitted it was a shock. Even under the loving care of his parents, he took three weeks to recover himself. His mother had knotted a pice in a saffron-coloured rag and hung it like a pendulam to one of the bamboo rafters over the sick bed; that was her promised offering to Mariamma, if She should deliver him from the fever.

After another week of rest he thought himself fit to work. When he went to the tool-corner to fetch his hatchet he found it extraordinarily heavy. It might have been his weakness, yet it seemed not. He purposely avoided the usual path to his garden lest he should pass through that horrible place. Somewhere in his mind, there lurked a vague sense of guilt. Had he spoken out anything in his fever? Mostly not. If he had, his mother would have been already busy with some ceremony to appease the offended Goddess. However he must make amends for his secret folly. For many days he thought of a suitable gift—sacrifice—penance. When the idea of sacrifice came to him for the first time he recoiled from it, thought he was going primitive. But the next instant he answered himself that he was not. After all, these rituals were not so meaningless! They could not have lived for generations if they were false and absurd. He gave no serious thought to the school and its padre now. They were something like a fleeting acquaintance in his life who passed the village in his travel. True, it had filled him with some strange ideas which caused his present discomfort, worry, and uneasy apprehensions. But he never for once accused the padre or held him responsible for his unhappiness. In a way he liked him and merely thought the foreigner was ignorant of the power of his Goddess. But now, he was absorbed in his own thoughts and forgot his life in the school.

He concentrated his attention on one thing—to win back the favour of his family Deity. The same pride which made his father send him to the school had descended down to him and he never consulted his parents. He did the whole thinking to himself. For many days no solution presented itself to him. One morning, absorbed in his own thoughts as usual, he went to work and all unconsciously his legs bore him mechanically through the same path that he had tramped for many years. Presently he felt a shiver of terror and found himself in that dreadful place which he was so scrupulously avoiding all these days. He looked round and found the place exactly the same, except that it was covered with autumn leaves and the grass, which was revealed in tiny patches turned to a dirty yellow. He had always liked the tender areca-palms with their plumed tops. He lifted his head to rest his eyes on them for a relaxation. But they swayed slowly and dangerously, he thought, against the feathery clouds. He felt a sudden lurch in his heart. How could he trust himself to go further? This echo of fear seemed to him to be the second premonitory signal of the inevitable evil. He returned home and excused himself with a bad headache and giddiness. From that day Dasappa became even more thoughtful and melancholy and sat with unseeing look in his eyes for hours together. He was invariably preoccupied when his mother called him and after two or three unsuccessful attempts she was rewarded with a surprised look from her son. It made her extremely anxious. Her wrinkled face questioned with deep concern. She suspected that some evil Mohini had taken possession of her son. 'My dear child,' she said in her gentle tone, 'I want you to promise me not to hide anything from me. It is very important and there are many things which your young head cannot know.' She waited expecting a promise from her son but was not encouraged with anything of that sort. She continued, 'You see, it might reveal your unknown malady. Now, my son did you see any Mohini near the tamarind tree that is beside our garden She is an evil Mohini and has ruined many a youth. And by the manner of your look, talk or even walk, I am almost certain that it is the Mohini. How thin you have become! I can count your ribs. She always—'

Dasappa was just then trying to hear his mother and he asked, 'What is that Mohini, mother? I don't really understand you.'

'Oh my child! Curse that wicked Mohini! What an innocent babe she has caught this time!' She wailed, almost concluding that the evil temptress had possessed her son. She continued in a grave and hushed tone. 'You want to know how a Mohini looks like. Well, she is the most beautiful damsel—beauty that no human being can possess or describe. With this ethereal beauty she enchants many young men who fall an easy prey to her. Neither do the men get any pleasure which they seek because her whole delight is to play a mischievous tantalising game and suck her victim's blood. You must shun her as if she were poison—the very cobra. More deadly, more surreptitious than a cobra—that she is, my child. If you want to know whether it is a Mohini or not there is an old trick. She is always dressed in milky white and mostly appears on a moonlit night. She walks on air, doesn't step on the ground and the tiny bells in her ankles make bewitching music. One ought to be an ascetic to escape from such temptations, my son. I wish I had warned you before. Sometimes you can see through her as you see things indistinctly through mist. That is a sure indication of a Mohini. This particular Mohini mostly dwells in that tamarind tree. She was the wife of the next door Ramiah,' she whispered looking in all directions to make sure that no one was within earshot, as if it were some forbidden truth. 'She died on the seventh day of her marriage and has turned a Mohini to satisfy her lust. The wicked devil has already killed three men. She is insatiable. I don't

know when this village gets freed from this curse. Last year a bhiragi—'

He interrupted her, not in a mood to hear weird stories. 'It is all right, mother. I am not possessed with any Mohini. Only I haven't completely recovered from the fever. That is all.'

'Are you sure, my child?' she asked half-relieved from her anxiety. 'Are you sure that nothing has disturbed you lately? No dreams? Do you sleep soundly?'

'I am quite all right, really,' he said kindly. 'Please don't alarm yourself unnecessarily, mother. I am a little bit out of sorts merely because I have nothing to do—now that I don't go to the school. It doesn't matter, I shall mend in a few days.'

Dasappa, though he was not very attentive during the whole talk subconsciously took in the details of the appearance of a Mohini. He knew how to recognise a Mohini now—that is, if she should ever appear to him. The mother's anxiety filled Dasappa with another phantasy. He had enough of these infernal things even without this Mohini. The frightfulness of it was not a little lessened by the heavenly beauty of the new spectre.

The next day Dasappa went to the woods to bring some firewood. He started when the sun was just above him and was implored by his mother not to keep late in the woods. He walked and walked seeing no firewood, passing many dead tree stumps that would have yielded good fuel. He trudged along forgetting the very purpose for which he started from home. He was thinking of his guilt and the horrible punishment that was in store for him. He had allowed too much time to pass by without doing anything. Still what was he to do? He could not think of any suitable compensation that would satisfy Her. He was in the middle of the wood now. Everything around him was dry and tropically drowsy. The leafless branches cast quite a variety of shadow tracery. The dead leaves crunched under his feet. Somewhere a lazy crow cawed and flapped its wings. There were also the gentle pats of the falling leaves. Quite near him a woodpecker tapped harshly. Beyond all these sounds there seemed to him that a deep sinister silence reigned at the core; these sounds, as it were, disturbed only the surface but accentuated the profound silence. The very atmosphere was intriguing. Presently he caught his foot in a loose root and stumbled but steadied himself seizing an overhanging branch. Even this branch came off with a loud crack and his hatchet fell with a rasping thud. He thought he had cried 'my Mariamma' but had not. He was breathing hard. Something kicked his ribs from inside. 'Was it another—' he was afraid to finish his surmise. He felt like doing something to steady his nerves. Why did he come here? Oh, yes, he came wooding. He picked up the hatchet and started cutting some loose branches that were near. The sound annoyed him. He waited till its last echo died among the distant trees. He became afraid of the sound he was making. It looked to him as though he was revealing his hiding place to his pursuer. After a short time of uneasy cutting he sat down tired and not knowing what to do. Presently a vulture flew across in a shaft of sunshine and it fanned him slightly. He was startled from his inactivity. It gave him an unnatural fright. The ominous bird was usually associated with evil and it fed on putrefying corpse. He sniffed to feel any smell. There was no other scent except the smell of the freshly cut green wood and perhaps a faint odour from the ripe leaves. Yet he looked round slowly and cautiously. The flickering shadows wove patterns and the sieved sunshine blinked like baleful eyes. He had finished half a round when he saw some white hazy object that made him tremble. It might have been a patch of sky, yet it was not because it was slowly shifting. He found it difficult to breathe. He felt his hands clammy. The figure was approaching him slowly and in a zigzag way. But no sounds of steps reached him. Some scalding liquid trick-

led down his spine; strange insects crept down his limbs. Some invisible knives were sawing the throbbing chord in his temples. The white mass was moving slowly, crawling in a sickening and menacing way. He felt helpless. His jangled nerves sent shudders of shivering. He wanted to cry out but his tongue curled up. He thought there was the fire of a lime kiln in his throat. His blood was burning him like molten lead. He wanted to steady his tossing head with his hands but they were numb and lifeless. An acrid substance mounted his brains. A thick miasma sprang up everywhere. His eyesight began to fail him. Fog, impenetrable fog enveloped him; he saw nothing, heard nothing. He sank to the ground unconscious. The only thing he next knew was that his brow suddenly felt chill. He opened his eyes as from a long drunken stupor. It looked to him as though he had passed an age of forgetfulness. What was the first thing that his eyes met? The same phantom that had haunted him to unconsciousness was bending over him and almost touching him. His blood curdled up. Thoughts crowded and baffled him. All sense of reason left him. The one human instinct of self-protection became more alive and took entire possession of his mind. Sense of the closeness of the danger rushed to him and gave him superhuman strength. In his despair he gathered every ounce of his strength and with one violent effort snatched the hatchet and smashed it on the head that was threatening him. He wanted to scream but could not; somebody else screamed. He wanted to cry and appeal to his goddess but could not, somebody else cried and appealed to his goddess. He wanted to sob and relieve his agony but could not; somebody else moaned frightfully quite close to him. Rousing himself from the exhaustion the recent effort had caused, he looked at a heap of white clothes at his feet. The white folds writhed, twisted, and groaned. What was it all about? Slowly his eyes widened to gaze into a mass of silvery hair and from the centre of this silky white mass a scarlet patch spilled a red dye that was staining the hair and the clothes. Gradually he became aware of a sickening fear. Had he committed a murder? Murder! A convulsion froze him to his bones. No, no, he could never do that. He wanted only to drive away an evil Mohini that was haunting him. Yet, what was the gruesome heap at his feet. He made himself bold enough to bend and see what it was. From the confused folds of the clothes peered a face from which two black beads threw suffering and hatred. The groans grew fainter and between these painful moans, a strained woman's voice came incoherently. Was it real or merely the result of his nervous breakdown? Or had he turned a lunatic? He wanted to feel the reality of the white heap. It recoiled at his touch. Between the frightful groans he caught the words 'ungrateful dog—I watered—you were—were swooned—.' Close by there was a basket full of dry twigs and an earthen pot with the water surface just visible. So, she was after all some poor woman who had come collecting dry twigs. And she had taken pity on him and bathed his forehead with cold water when he was in a faint. That was the chill which revived him. Oh, what a dastardly crime he had committed! A pang of compunction smote him. In his anguish he fell on his knees and wailed, 'But you will not die, my good woman. I never meant to kill you—only wanted to drive the accursed Mohini. I shall carry you to the village and get the hakim to attend you. Tell me that I haven't killed you.' After a spell of silence he pressed his ear to her bosom. 'No', he shook his head slowly. 'She is dead. I have killed her.' His eyes wandered and met the blood-stained hatchet. He slowly reached for it with a nervous hand and scrutinised it. Then all of a sudden, he sprang to activity and fury. 'You, you have done this, he spat the words. 'How well have you executed your threat! You have taken your share of human blood. Human blood! That was your craving. Take more—drink more.' He began to hack the corpse with heavy blows like a mad

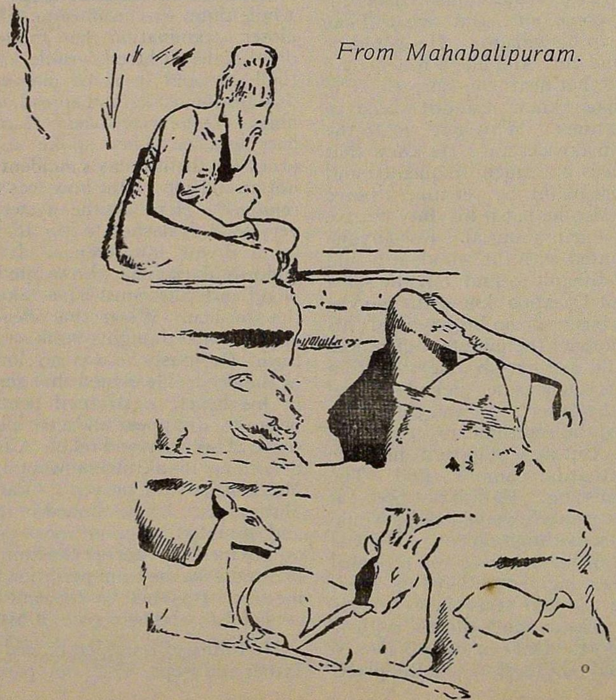
man. For a long time the woods echoed and re-echoed with dull thuds. A brief pause. Then wild noises began to disturb the night. And sometimes, at long intervals, a raving cry rose above all the noises and shook the black woods.

It was not till late in the next morning that Dasappa realised he had done a punishable crime and was in the grip of an earthly power. The storm of emotions and remorse had ended in sobs and he was calm now. He did not know how he had spent the night. Certainly he had not slept. He knew that he had not remained in any one place but was wandering. Whether he had walked or ran he could not remember. Had he by any misfortune murdered anybody from his village? For the life of him, he could not remember the face of the woman he had killed. If the woman came from any of the other villages, it might not come out. But what if she belonged to his village? He would be surely found out. And like a fool he had left the hatchet near the corpse. The whole village knew it and it would be easily identified. Why not go to the place and make certain? He knew that the place was not much frequented and and so there might be yet time to save himself. Also he felt it his duty to give the poor woman a burial. For anyone less acquainted with the woods it would have been difficult to find out the same place. But Dasappa knew the woods, rocks, and bushes from his boyhood; his keen eye noticed the minute differences and he could distinguish one tree from the other as easily as he picked out one cow from the other. So, even before the sun reached the zenith he directly got to the place. But he could not find the very thing that he came to find. The body was missing. Had it not been for the extreme mental exhaustion, he would have done something violent. The last six months of his life were too crowded with strange incidents that his mind knew how to take this surprise. He began to reason out things with a supreme effort. Once again he looked round to make himself sure of the place. Yes, it was the right place—the same big aspen tree to the left, the same boulder to the right and the same anthill beyond the boulder. Then, was the body removed by some villagers? No villager could have come there so soon. Was it not yesterday that it occurred? Or was it days ago? He could not be sure. Anyhow there were the basket, the pot though overturned—perhaps the work of a thirsty crow—and even his hatchet. Also the bundle of firewood that he had collected. So it was the same place all right. If the body had been removed by the villagers these articles of evidence could have been also removed to be placed before the village panchayat. Did the wild animals devour the corpse last night? It was possible, yet it was not. They could not have done such a neat work of it. He examined the place carefully. The earth was no doubt disturbed but there was no sign of a wild scramble. He began to hope that the whole thing was an illusion. But upon closer examination he found some dried scales of blood visible clearly on the leaves and in some places the fine dust on the leaves had spread into thin films. There were blood stains on the hatchet also. They spoke volumes of proof for the last day's incident. It was not an illusion. But how was the body removed? Here was the mystery. Soon, very soon, it flashed to him that it must be a divine interference. It was the goddess Mariamma who wanted human blood and She must have taken away the sacrifice. When this idea dawned on him his thoughts took a different turn. Curiously he was no longer sick of the deed. He owned that somewhere in his heart, a strained pent-up ear, began to disappear and give place to a sense of security and relief. A feeling of devotional thankfulness swept upon him. He kneeled and prayed. 'Pardon me Mariamma. I have sinned in ignorance and doubted your powers. You have taught me well. Accept the human sacrifice and save me from perdition. Release me from this hell of torment.' He felt peaceful to the very core of his being.

He returned home, embraced his aged father and wept. The poor parents who

had begun to despair after a long fruitless search for him, also wept. After all of them had wept themselves out Dasappa narrated his experiences in the woods. He said, 'My dear father, I was foolish in doubting you. I shall never use this hatchet for my work. It is too holy for such a thing. I will place it in the niche and worship it every day. Let me please Her and make amends through this.'

Boranna was overjoyed at his son's return to faith and piety and he said solemnly. 'You are very wise, my child. If you had only heard me you would have saved all these. Yet it is good in a way that you tasted the divine power. Do not worry about the old woman, my son, whoever she may be. It was her lot and she was ordained to die a death of sacrifice. She is indeed fortunate to have been particularly chosen by Mariamma and she has surely reached the land of eternal peace. Do not fear anything. No woman has been missed from this village. She must be from one of the villages on the other side of the woods. Besides, our Mariamma is protecting you. She has removed the body. No one need know anything of this. Though you held the hatchet it was the divine force that inspired it. You were only instrumental in her death. Trust Her, my son; you will always prosper. But,' he stressed every word and his tone became severe as though he was the divine medium of warning, 'when once you offend Her, there is no escape, no protection from Her terrible punishments. She is as generous in Her reward as she is cruel in Her punishment. My son, remember an old saying: When the gods revenge what is there for poor mortals to do but to bow to the inevitable.'"



From Mahabalipuram.

IN MUFTI

By MANJERI S. ISVARAN

HE saw her standing on the threshold of the house door opening on the street, a very pretty child about four years old, just a tiny bloom wind-blown from a luxuriant spray. She had eyes wide as wonder and dark, dark abundant hair, too abundant for her age, plaited from the middle of the brow and joined to the braid curling at the nape. Child's innocence was her shining apparel; but her girlish shame was covered by a piece of beaten gold, fashioned like a little peepul leaf and swinging from a twisted alpaca thread tied about her loins. A necklace with a sovereign pendent was the only other ornament on her person and she stood on the threshold opening and closing the door vigorously and pleased with the squealing of the hinges.

It was mid-morning and the street being far from the main road had few pedestrians. He watched the child from the thither side, from a curve where the street twitched abruptly into a blind alley, watched with intent, purposeful eyes. He seemed to make certain mental calculations and his glance though furtive was bold. He then began slowly to walk up, but stopped short seeing a woman coming against him with a basket on her head, loudly vending greens. She passed him by and out of sight, and at the next impediment which came immediately after he swore vulgarly in a mutter. It was a pedlar raucously crying, colouring the morning air with a crowd of many-coloured balloons shaped like pumpkins and gourds and clustering on the top of a pole which he held high in one hand and with the other trilled a bell to keep to the rhythm of his cry. He stopped near the child ringing the bell quickly; a young woman, obviously her mother, came out and paid for a couple of balloons and giving them to the child took her by the hand to go in. The watcher saw this with his heart in his mouth; but was relieved to find the next instant the child stamping her feet to be left alone. The mother vanished inside and the child stood whisking the balloons by the threads tied to their nipples. The pedlar passed; the sound of his bell still came from an adjacent street; and when with a sense of achievement he turned round to move, he only turned to see an old fellow with a gibbous belly tottering up with a stick. He swore more vulgarly in his infinite impatience and spat outright; the child might go into the house any moment. He wished to break the stick and kick the belly. Every slow pace of the old man fell like a thud upon his palpitating heart; the blood cuddled to his bones and his fingers itched with frenzy. He felt like strangling the stupid old thing that tottered on three feet. Tap, tap, tap, the stick tapped by, and the hemispherical belly dwindled into a convex back. He made a dart; there was a sharp explosion of the balloons bursting; then the shrill scream of a child. Tucking the necklace away in the clothy layer around his waist and looking neither to the right nor to the left he dashed away. He neared a bend that would shut him off from the scene of his crime and just when rounding it, heard the first cry, 'Thief!' 'Thief!' echoed a dozen voices instantly and feet came running after him. 'Thief! Thief!' 'Catch him!' 'Bind him!' cried voices staccato and sonorous; he shot into alleys, scurried through tortuous streets, ducked, doged, kept gluing along walls where walls were, and from the growing noises knew that his pursuers were swelling.

The throughfare was in sight; a minute more and he would be lost in its swirling traffic. But he felt a hand clutching his shoulder, heard the shout of triumph; wriggling, his thews on fire, he cut into a side-street and kick-

ing open a small door on the wall entered in. The door had no latch and that on the farther side of the narrow privy was tightly shut. He was hemmed in and the pursuer hot on his heels entered after and grasped him round the neck. Then binding his hands behind his back with the cloth thrown across his shoulders he dragged him out into the midst of the crowd which was panting, perspiring, and with fists clenched to a hearty pummeling . . .

The passenger in the third-class compartment who dozed while its other occupants numbering seven—four men, two women and a child were fast asleep awoke with a start for he seemed to have felt the pummeling. In his imagination Essakki re-enacted the exciting scenes of two years ago—his snatching the necklace from the person of the child, the child's scream of pain and fear, the crimson welt his violent pulling away had left on her delicate skin, the chase, the stern face of the complainant, the police court, and the magistrate sitting darkly on the high dais. At twenty-five though a worthy candidate for a Fagin's Academy, he had not made theft as his sole trade; a dislike to work in mills and factories or for menial service and a certain romanticism in his blood which regarded life as an adventure and a sport turned him into an honest sort of hooligan and he thieved only to satisfy the cruel necessity of existence. But for once sport had turned into battle, and embattled he had served his two years' rigorous in the Vellore Jail. And the term over he was returning home.

Essakki sat with knees up and head thrown against the wooden panelling in a corner seat facing the engine, his body rocking to the motion of the train and his ears taking in drowsily the endless lullaby of rolling wheels and coupling links. Occasionally a cloud of coalsmoke shot with fiery particles sailed along; he stirred in his seat when the blackening bits came hitting through the window on his face. His mind was alive though his eyes were closed; he thought of the prison life, of the days he had swept the yard, washed the cells, and ground ragi for the prison food. They had worked him hard and his spirit was dead. Now life was again beginning for him, life most fresh, growing suddenly out of the twilight death of two years. The change was miraculous; the muddy vesture of decay glowed like a mantle of fire and gold. He will thieve never more; his last act of crime against a child created in his subconscious the picture of a host of children clamouring his wicked deed in his ears and condemning him for lifting foul hands against helpless innocence.

Zug-zug zug-zug tr-ra-rah . . . over runnels and broad canals, through leafy lanes and wide rice-fields, past heaths and marshes, the train rushed pounding its iron song and Essakki found himself humming a tune that had lifted a stage-actress to stardom and had been on the lips of everyone in the town for a most musical time. An exultation he had never before experienced filled his mind; rising up he leaned out of the window gazing at the fast-receding distances. The mother of months was in her full matronly splendour; the night lay like a great cool cyst swelling with celestial light, shadowsoft and listening to its own mysterious song of silence. He drew down his head and looked in; the contrast was terrible.

In the tawny electric light mottled with dead moths and a swarm of moths flitting about the men and women looked older and dirtier; one or two lying asprawl and snoring were even vulgar. The constable who escorted him was in mufti; he had made a bundle of his cap, puttees, and khaki uniform and placed it near his reposing head. At his feet below the bench stood his boots, black and heavy, with tongues lolling out like those of tired dogs. The leather was cracked at the toes and creased and pouchy at the heels; the constable had not taken the trouble to polish them; perhaps he was expecting a new pair, Essakki thought, and thrust out his nether lip in disgust. There was a strong smell of ripe mangoes in the compartment; a basket up above

the rack breathed the season of measles and mellow fruitfulness. At Katpadi Essakki had seen a couple of trucks being loaded with the fruits. Inhaling the smell his mouth watered and he thirsted to dig deep his teeth in the soft luscious flesh of a mango.

A baby wailed. Essakki sank back in his seat. The older of the two sleeping women sat up and awoke the younger. 'Have him for a while; he is thirsty,' she said giving the child to her. The baby blinked at the light and troubled by its glare set up a louder wail. The mother dandled it in her arms; then placing it on her lap, looked stealthily round and unfastened her bodice. There was a sharp smack of suckling; then an infant grunt of pleasure.

Through slits of seeming slumber Essakki watched the mother and child. His look grew interested. It was wonderful to be a baby, he thought, and be suckling like that! He tried to remember his own mother. . . abruptly his reflection was cut short for his eyes caught sight of something falling from the waist of the woman when she inserted a thumb and loosened her sari for a little comfort. He quickly knew that it was a currency note of good denomination; and with this knowledge, his mind which was luminous till a moment ago grew dim and gloomed like an attic and thoughts there like rats began to gnaw loudly, scamper wildly. Then asudden a shadow of a smile crossed his face; he dreamed of the freedom that was his from the morrow, of the plump dusky girl who sold vegetables in the kotwal market. Her caresses came warmly to his memory and her laughter floated sweetly to his ears; ah luck that he could have a ripping time with her after such a long absence!

Reluctantly he threw a quick blanket over the vision of his sweetheart and rose to his feet. The currency note still lay on the floor, the lady had not noticed its fall. And with a movement between a hop and a sprint he brushed past her and leaning out of the window blew his nose. He walked back allowing his right foot to make a curve of exploration; stopped, coughed placing a palm on the pit of his stomach, and stumbling over the boots stooped and set them in position.

The constable in mufti stirred in his sleep breathing heavily. And for the fraction of a minute his sleeping eyes were wide awake, much too wide and aware for their tiredness.

Essakki regained his seat.

Just then the train slacked: the permanent way was under repair and on either side the track sleepers lay tarrily aglow on moonlit mounds of sand.

It was six o'clock and broad daylight when the train pulled up at the Basin Bridge junction for the scheduled halt of fifteen minutes. The passengers in the compartment tidied themselves and put their luggage in order and their talk was muted with the sleep and silence of overnight. A thin Anglo-Indian in white boarded the carriage and collected the tickets. The constable in a corner struggled into his uniform and this came as a surprise to Essakki. He looked askew at him and then at the young lady and scratched his head meditatively.

'Need you put on your uniform?' he presently asked his escort.

'What were you taking me for? Your pot-companion, eh?'

Not the kind of answer that Essakki expected and he found no words for further talk. In trousers and coat buttoned up to the neck the policeman sat unrolling his puttees and as he began to tie one about a hairy leg Essakki was visibly excited. He moistened his lips and essayed to speak again. 'I shall polish your boots for you,' he said tremulously, holding out his cloth. 'They are dusty.'

The policeman lifted his head and almost barked: 'Why are you so officious? And why does your voice quaver? You are a free fellow now.' And he smiled rougishly stroking his moustache. He then took his boots

and giving each a dash with his coated elbow inserted deliberate feet into them and laced them tight. 'I am a better polisher,' he continued, 'and have polished boots for twenty years. And besides a policeman's boots need stronger fingers than yours.'

The train snorted out and all its smoke and steam had crept into Essakki's head in a whirl and his heart had begun to beat wildly to the stroke of its piston before it yielded up its breath at the Central station. In the bustle of porters and in the clutter of trolleys he let

'What the hell do you mean?' asked the constable.
'Your boots!' and he winked maliciously.

Essakki turned aside to hide the leer on his face; the policeman had refused the service so humbly offered by him and he knew that policemen never refused the services of others, especially when it came to palm stroking palm in friendship and geniality.

himself lose awhile; but when through the exit he saw his fellow-travellers, the women, disappearing, he felt that a very valuable link that connected him with them had snapped.

At eight o'clock accompanied by the constable the ex-convict reported

himself before the Commissioner of Police. His name went into the black register in fadeless ink.

Walking out of the police office Essakki asked the constable: 'You think you are cleverer than I?'

'What the hell do you mean?'

'Your boots!' and he winked maliciously.

'Confound the boots. You have been harping on them most disgustingly.' He cocked his police cap and wiped an imaginary bead of sweat off his brow.

'Now, now, why should we quarrel? Why can't we be friends?' And he extended his hand in well-meaning fellowship.

'Friends! Bah! You must thank your stars that I have not packed you to jail again. Your friends are on the slime of the gutter.' And he swung on his heels with a swagger.

Essakki was too choked with rage to answer; he saw the boots, puttees, khaki uniform, and red peaked cap disappearing into a coffee hotel. He had tried to be safe from a possible discovery and search but had not thought that his caution would cost him so much.

Seated at a table inside the hotel and drinking in the odour of onions and savouries the constable unloosened the lace of one of his boots. He bent low and fished out of it a piece of crumpled paper which he smoothened on his thigh, a smile spreading over his face and a sigh of supreme contentment filling out his shrunk shanks.

It was a ten rupee currency note!

FLOWERS AND CROTONS

By A. RAMIAH

SOME pursue gardening as a hobby; some pursue it scientifically; some pursue it without rhyme or reason.

Now, my concern is with the latter variety, a variety that devotes itself to rearing up odourless flowers and crotons in pots, tubs, and tincases. They may be called the enthusiasts, the mad mullahs.

To go bang at the question what is the meaning or purpose of having a flower or croton garden in your house rampant with odourless multicoloured flowers and crotons? In spite of the resounding Latin names with which you assail me I refuse to be taken in. I refuse to succumb. I say it is a deliberate waste of time, energy, and money to fool yourself about odourless flowers and crotons. What pleasure or profit do you derive in planting flowers and crotons in pots and tubs and looking at them with *eyes down* instead of planting trees upon the soil and looking at them with *eyes up*. Look at a tree, a plant, or shrub embedded and rooted to the soil and then at the silly, sapless, buttressed, and bandaged-up growths in pots and tubs. Look at this picture and that!

Our enthusiasts, our 'potty' enthusiasts must of necessity make provision against the inroads of four-footed animals and weather; so he employs a gardener—one of those sly shirkers, outrageous red-turbaned type.

You may turn round and say: 'Sir, you know nothing. It is my hobby. Do I tread on your corns?'

Against that I butt in protesting, 'Sir, you are a public menace in as much as you breed those abominable invisible blood-suckers comprehensively called mosquitoes. Talk of health officers declaring that tanks and wells breed them! Is not that sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof? Why aggravate the nuisance with your collection of pots and tubs?'

I remember once a very good friend of mine taking me round his flower garden and enthusiastically bombarding me with ponderous Latin names that he bestowed on each and every silly little wisp of grass, flower, or croton that were there right under our eyes. Well, he reeled off, and, when we came to a particular spot, he, with all the importance of a Napolean exclaimed:—

'See! Look at those sunflowers. Have you ever seen such beauties? How big! How big! How sweet.'

'So, that yellow fright is a sunflower, is it?' I feebly put in.

Contempt and pity were writ large on his face when I finished.

'What, you don't know what a sunflower is? Awful pity!'

Pity? I confess I am not the worse for my ignorance; nay, I am the better for it. As far as I know this world of ours would go merrily on its axis sans sunflower.

In spite of my visible and evident discomfort he took me all around his garden and talked of basil, pansy, daffodil, geranium, marigold, verbeena etc. etc. (*Inter alia* allow me to say that when we came up to his bed of roses there was not even one flower: not even a bud); not one of his flowers or grasses or plants was able to tickle my olfactory nerves. I was wishing ardently to get away when thank God, I was suddenly arrested from doing so—for on turning my head to

the left I was attracted by a bed of tomatoes in vigorous and overpowering profusion. I was thrilled. What a delight to rest your eyes upon a bed of tomatoes wherein you cannot see the plant for the fruits! The ones I beheld were plumpy and juicy. But for the fact that all were green I would have then and there squatted myself down near the bed and made a hearty repast of the fruit. I could not help, after feasting my eyes upon his tomatoes, declaring to my friend: 'I congratulate you heartily. That it struck you to rear up tomatoes is a happy sign of your sagacity. How very *useful* tomatoes are. Vitamin and all that. I should prefer the colour of tomato—ripe or green—to all the glittering gaudy colours of your flowers.'

My enthusiastic words tickled him. 'Oh, you should see my bed of capsicums. Look over the bed of tomatoes,' said he.

I bounded from where I was, and, there, right enough was a bed of very big, fleshy, knotty (naughty too) intensely green capsicums hanging on to the mother plants so gracefully, so temptingly, so appetisingly, that I could not resist the temptation of plucking a couple of them and eating, nay, devouring them on the spot, plus the sprinkling of wood ash sticking on to the fruits. My friend could not understand my eating them raw and with so much gusto.

'Oh, thou great man! I was always dreaming to be by a bed of this species of capsicum and gourge myself. Fact! Now I have attained my wish. My dear fellow, I have to pay from six to nine pies for each in the market at Madras. Now ah, verily this is heaven!' was my exclamation, spicy exclamation.

The foregoing incident is full of lessons to you and to me. Let me unburden myself.

The time, the energy, and money you waste on your 'flower-gardens' is unpardonable. Let me tell you something about flowers, as I have conceived, in general.

It is a notorious fact that in every age and in every clime those folks who are known as poets first began to meddle with flowers; not the flowers they grew (for they were idle folks) but with the ones others had grown. Each member of the hierarchy worked himself or herself up into white heat enthusiasm and wrote unalloyed rodomontade. Some people with no pretensions for poetry took them up for Gospels. The contagion spread resulting in their rearing up flowers and shrubs. After a time came the man of science. He began by grouping, classifying, sorting, grafting, placing, ticketing, numbering the flowers. He wrote ponderous volumes and gave very mystifying Latin names to the flowers and shrubs. Very arbitrary names too. Finally all his labours were hooked on to a science called botany. He even dissected them much to the dismay of sentimental Jhonnies. The demand of science, you know.

Then the painters came to the front. They began mixing up their colours in all sorts of permutations and combinations and the laborious results were transferred on to their canvass. They even outdid the colour of the flowers in particular and general. They surpassed Nature. Pagans and Vandals! Then came the dyers. They mixed and remixed all the colours they could lay their hands on in big vats and went to the clothier who dipped his yarns in them and wove out cloths wonderfully pleasing and at times stunning. The female of the species human went into raptures over them. So went on the thing in a vicious circle so much so, that, to-day all the poetry in flowers is knocked out of their bottoms.

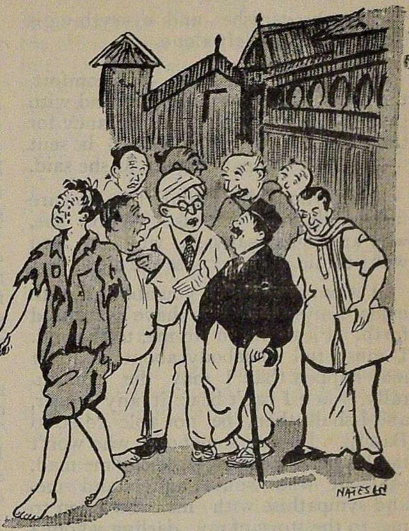
Now, instead of fooling about flower gardens why not interest yourself in kitchen garden. Those who have compounds about their houses ought to set about it in right earnest. Why go to the vegetable market and give fancy prices. You can grow them in the plot where you grew your monstrosities. A bed of tomatoes, capsicum, ***keerais***, coriander, is in no way deficient in its artistic beauty. It looks a pleasing

green carpet with hidden things that go to make up your daily food. If you want a bower to moon or fool about why not a *pandal* of grape vine or any other common vines? Creepers, tubers etc., could be conveniently and profitably grown. But, no, you must imitate the westerners in prefering odourless flowers and meaningless leaves and grasses. Such things should not have a place in a tropical climate like ours.

Now let us come to trees—fruit trees. There is no end to the number of fruit trees that are natives of our country. If we seriously take to planting them we profit ourselves both in money and health. Some may say the game is not worth the candle. It is nonsense. To-day we have advanced so much in the field of agriculture and chemistry that we can grow almost anything and everything in any soil. I assert it after seeing the tomatoes grown in the garden of my friend. The idea that european vegetables cannot be grown outside Ooty and Bangalore is a myth. I know a friend of mine who successfully grew cabbages in Calicut. In another place another friend grew very good oranges. All in plains.

Granting that you are not enamoured of kitchen gardens I would ask you, instead, to have fine lawns laid out in your compound. As an example look at the sensible way the M. & S. M. offices in Madras have laid out the lawns. How reposing and enchanting the spectacle is! Instead of that suppose they had crammed the place with flowerpots. It would have been a calamity. Fresh, velvety green patches of grass watered sprinklingly is so charming to look at. And when you grow a good fruit tree here and there the picture is complete enough.

He thought he was the cause of her death and in a paroxysm of agony left home, and walked about like a God-discarded creature



'They look at me, whisper to one another, and tap their heads meaningly'.

BAPUJI

By

L. S. RAMAMRITAM

I AM tired of the world. I hate it.

Those that see me, they look at me, whisper to one another, and tap their heads meaningly. Some others are plainer. They say clearly and in a more understandable way: 'Who is this young man ? He is so young (I *am* young, only about eighteen) and yet he is a sanyasi, and he doesn't look like a beggar.' Then some one else replies to the interested inquirer. 'Ah, a pity! a thousand pities! He is a madman. So young and so mad! You ask him why he became a sanyasi, and then his eyes roll, he sheds tears and replies, 'Bapuji!' You ask him anything, and he always replies, 'Bapuji!' Bapuji . . . Bapuji, nothing but that one word and they pass on.

Fools, they think me to be mad! But, am I? Would to God that I were! I am as sane as any of them, and that is the pity! If I were only mad, then I would be quite unconscious of the terrible tortures that I undergo day and night! Tortures, horrible, horrible! More gruesome than if I were physically wounded, because they are mental! I cry, I sob, I tear my hair, I wail, 'Bapuji, Bapuji.' But no use! no use! She is never going to return to me, not on this earth! I am waiting eagerly for the day when I shall go to her, when I die! Die! Is death after all as terrible as it is represented to be? Will it be more terrible than what I suffer every day? Sometimes, when I feel that I can't bear it any longer I want to put an end to my wretched, cursed life, and when that feeling comes over me, I get a vision of Bapuji; I seem to feel two cherub hands round my neck, and a soft cheek against my own. Then I hear a sweet comforting kind whisper in my ears, 'Oh don't, Kunju mama! If you kill yourself now, you won't come to me, for your death will be unnatural! So wait, wait for the time when God himself will send you to me, to be with me always! And then we shall never part!'

Then she vanishes, and everything is black, and I am left alone.

Alone! Did I say? No, with comfort, the comfort she has given me and with that happy feeling of expectancy for the time to come, when I shall be sent to her, never to part again, as she said.

'But, who is this Bapuji that you are talking about?' you ask. 'Who is she, why are you a sanyasi, why do you want to die, just because she died?'

It is only to talk to you about her, to explain myself, that I have ventured forth. Please listen to me, to the end. I must tell somebody about it, or it may happen that I may die unnaturally, when I can't bear it any longer, and I shall then, be not able to go to Bapuji. I want somebody who won't tap his head meaningly, or call me mad, someone who would understand me, and sympathise with me. So listen to me, to the story of my darling whom I killed . . . don't shrink, but listen, for God's sake, for her sacred memory's sake, for my sake, listen to the end, and help me.

I won't keep you waiting any longer.

Here I go.

II

Bapuji was a child, and she died a child. She was about four years old, when she passed away. She was not related to me. She was the only daughter of our neighbour. Mr. Muthuswami Iyer and my father were great friends. They had lived in adjoining houses for a long time, about seven or eight years, and they changed their quarters only two years ago. And Mr. Muthuswami Iyer and his wife, they were both kind to us, children (I have two brothers and a sister). We used to go to their house often, to play with their children who were all boys. After several years, about six years after they had come to live next to us, a daughter was born to them, and she was Bapuji.

Of course, her real name wasn't Bapuji; it was something else, but somehow, we calling her by her pet name so much, forgot her real name. And somehow, I took to that little child, and she took to me. About twelve years of age lay between us and I was rather big for my age and she was small and pretty. With her little round head surmounted by thick curly hair and her fine white skin she was simply grand to look at. But that wasn't all. Her chief beauty lay in her eyes. Her eyes, they were big like a pair of almonds and their innocent gaze, if it fell on you, would hold you, and melt you. Anyway, her gaze held *me* and melted *me*.

She was not plumpy (plumpy children make you want to take them up and caress them), and she was not puny. There was something ladylike about her. If she didn't like anything, or anybody, she could quell him or her with a disdainful look of her almond eyes. She was by nature a bit reserved, but somehow she took a fancy to me, and kept it throughout. And I, I also came to like her, with a more than ordinary fervour; I don't know how this kind of thing happens—it is here, perhaps, that we feel the hand of fate. My fervour very quickly developed into a passionate love for the child, a devotion which was something like the kind that a dog bears towards its master.

It was astonishing to see the great influence the small child exercised over me; everybody who saw us, said so. It was I who fed her with her milk from the days of her infancy; I bathed her, I rocked her on my knees, I sang her to sleep.

My friends and brothers and sisters used to laugh at me for paying so much attention to Bapuji, and even her mother used to laugh at me, in a good-natured sort of way. It was I who taught her the first words and I think you can now understand the particular relation that existed between us both.

And how she liked me! She wouldn't do anything, she would not make friends with or enemies of any of her child friends without consulting her Kunju mama. From the day she began to prat-

tle, she christened me Kunju mama, and from that time, I remained always Kunju mama to her. She wouldn't take her food if Kunju mama was not by her side to coax her, she wouldn't go to sleep if there was not Kunju mama to sing to her and tell her stories. Then I must take her in my arms and she would lock her arms round my neck and press her cheek against mine, and I would be telling her stories and rocking her and she would go to sleep in my rocking arms. Ah, those were happy days!

And so we grew, side by side, I being something like a mother to her and something of a necessity to Mrs Muthuswami Aiyar—because her daughter would do nothing without me—till the time came for me to go to school.

III

My parents had been sending me to a local elementary school, and my studies there, being over, I had now to go to a higher school. I was to go to Madras, and the date of my departure was fixed. I was to start at daybreak.

I went to her house, the night prior to my departure. She had been very annoying to her mother that day, and when she saw me, she was delighted. I gave her her food silently, and with a choking feeling in my heart. When I saw the girl's great delight on seeing me I could not get the nerve to tell her that I was going away. As usual, she asked me to tell her a story, and I took her in my arms, and rocked her to sleep. For a few seconds she looked queerly at me, when she noted my unusual silence. But she did not say anything. She forgot everything soon, and became absorbed in my story, and went to sleep. I laid her gently in her bed, and went home with a heavy heart.

About my days at school, I have nothing to tell here, first because they do not concern this narrative, and secondly, they were as eventful and eventless as any other schoolboy's. I did not go home for the first year for the Michaelmas and Christmas holidays but as the time for the closing of the school for the long summer vacation lasting for two and a half months neared, I became restless and excited with that happy feeling of expectancy which could be understood only by those who have gone away from home leaving their dear ones.

I became happy and radiant with the joy I experienced when I thought of how I would be seeing again my mother, my father, my brothers and sisters, and Bapuji.

At last the day came and passed. The school had closed. I packed up my belongings and started for my village, for home.

I arrived home, and after the first transports of joy at seeing my dear sisters and brothers were over, after my young urchin brothers and sisters had ransacked my baggage and given vent to their great disappointment and dissatisfaction at not finding anything 'good to eat,' I recollected Bapuji and with a funny whoop of delight darted out, crying aloud her name.'

On the way my mother stopped me.

'Oh, you don't know, they have gone.'

I trembled and gasped. My throat went dry. 'Where?' I managed to ask.

'They have changed their quarters, they are now in A—.'

I breathed, and the day became brighter. I knew A—. It was about three miles distant from my own place. After all, only three miles! So I had not lost Bapuji! I reflected happily (alas! poor wretch that I am, I did not know that I was to lose her for ever!).

Then during dinner I heard how there were festivals being celebrated in C— (C—is a well known sacred place of pilgrimage, and has a temple which is visited often by many pilgrims from far off lands, and the temple festivals are famous. It lies midway between our

village and A—;about two miles from A—and one mile from our village.), and how they were all going over to see the festival and enjoy the fun, how they were to go there in two days to see the *Ravana Vahanam*, and you can well imagine their childish prattle and incessant talk. Dinner was over by one o'clock, and I set off from our house for A—to see my Bapuji.

I reached A—in about an hour. As I neared their house, an unusual feeling came over me, and opening the small wooden gate entered in with a thrill of excitement and joy. All were inside the house. I opened the open door wider, and passed in and shut it again, and tip-toed in, silently like a thief (oh, can you imagine the wonderful joy you experience when you spring up suddenly at an unexpected moment before people who like you and love you?). My pulses were thumping like hammer; there was a screen; I parted it a little and looked in.

Ammami was taking her meals—probably Mr Muthuswami Aiyar had gone to office, and the boys to play—with Bapuji sitting near her trying to force some sugar into the mouth of a celluloid doll she was holding in her hand.

I looked at the child yearningly. Somehow, I felt that there was something wistful about her big wonderful eyes. Her lower lip drooped a little, as if she were peeved, and she was looking sad and helpless, as if she wanted somebody who would understand her.

I could not contain myself any longer. The situation was getting too exciting for me to withstand it. I parted the screen roughly and stood before them.

'Bapuji!' I cried. I almost shouted the word, in a voice that was strange even to me.

Ammami gave a startled cry of astonishment and fear, and Bapuji, she looked up calmly and saw me. Her big eyes opened wider and grew bigger. 'Kunju mama!'

Crash! The celluloid doll flew from her hand and smashed its head against the wall. There was a loud noise of things falling and breaking, (they were her playthings) and with a bound, the next moment, she was in my arms, laughing and crying, chuckling and frisking like a dog, giving vent to cries of delight (oh God! it is torturing to think of it) and hugging me, pinching my cheeks, my nose, and pulling my hair. I sat down, nay, sank down, overwhelmed, and I was not able to speak. I crushed her in a fond embrace, and blinked through a threatening tear that filled my eyes.

Oh, the chatter that followed! How could I go away without telling her? Why didn't I tell her? How she searched for me, how she felt while I was away, how she cried, how she didn't find anybody to play with her, to tell her stories, to rock her to sleep!

Her innocent talk cut into and hurt me more than a knife.

Ammami was of course very glad to see me. I stayed there for lunch. Bapuji clung to me close, and brought her dolls and played with me. Soon after, Mr Muthuswami Aiyar returned from his office, and when the lunch was over I took up Bapuji in my arms and addressed her parents:—

'I shall take Bapuji with me home, and return here with her tomorrow.'

Bapuji clapped her hands with delight when she heard my proposal. Muthuswami Aiyar laughed and pinched her cheek. 'Of course, you may,' he consented.

IV

We went along, playing and gambolling all the way, chasing squirrels and birds, plucking cocoanut leaves and making whistles out of them, singing and chattering. Bapu did all the talking, never giving me a chance to put in a word of my own. She went on, rattling all that she had kept to herself during the past twelve months, saying all kinds of things, sense and nonsense, sensible and absurd, trivial and important. And what with our

loitering about on the way, we were able to reach C—only at about 6 p. m., when all the lights were on.

C—was in all its glory, with its big crowds and the numerous fruitstalls, bookstalls, sweetmeat stalls, and merry-go-rounds, and the various other attractions which can be seen in a place of festivity. We went on, sightseeing, till we came to the temple, where we saluted the *Lingam* and the *Amman*, and I showed Bapuji all over the temple, pointing out the *Vahanams*. Then we went and saw the silver *Ravana Vahanam*, and when we came out of the temple it was about seven and as we turned homeward, I saw a small crowd in the distance about a few yards from us, and something black and massive looming above the crowd.

'The elephant!' I cried in ecstasy. 'Shall we go and see it?'

Bapuji clapped her hands with delight. 'Of course! The elephant!'

'Then come on!' I swung her on my back and ran towards the crowd, Bapuji laughing with delight as she swung to and fro due to my running.

In a few minutes we were before the elephant.

V

The elephant, it was a big one, and a good specimen of its kind. It was young and its small eyes twinkled intelligently; the mahout was sitting on it, and now and then lifted up young children on to the back of the elephant, where he kept them for some time (only for money) to lower them down again. The elephant was sweeping into its mouth the jaggery, rice, and cocoanuts with which some persons among the crowd were feeding it. Bapuji and I watched it interested very much. Bapuji was clinging to me tight. It seemed that she was a bit afraid of the big thing. But I laughed and patted her reassuringly . . . my God, a few minutes later came the terrible blow!

A fiendish-looking scamp, who was about seventeen or eighteen years old, now came on the scene. He looked at the elephant a little meditatively. Few noticed him, but I did. Suddenly, quick as a flash, he took out something from under his upper cloth and held it out to the elephant. The elephant stretched its long trunk, picked it from his hand, and I saw it was a cocoanut. The elephant put it into its mouth and the scoundrel at once burst into a loud laugh, as if at a huge joke.

An interval of about a second or two. Suddenly the elephant gave forth a terrible roar of extreme pain and rage, and from its mouth dropped the 'cocoanut'—glass, quicklime, needles, and nails. We all saw it and gave forth, one and all of us, a shout of indignation which at once turned into a wail and gasp of fear and horror, for we saw suddenly the scamp suspended about twelve feet from the ground, caught in the revengeful and fatal grip of the elephant's trunk. Our knees shook. We could not move. Crash! We closed our eyes; there was a dull thud and when we opened our eyes, we saw him, with a broken head; the blood trickling, and the flesh dangling, lying on the pavement, dead. We screamed. The elephant, goaded with pain and its fury and fighting spirit roused by blood, suddenly charged on us. Bapuji screamed, the mahout tumbled down on the ground and was stamped and trampled by the elephant. We ran pell mell shouting in terror.

Like an avalanche the elephant came thundering after us, and we flew before it. Everybody rushed anywhere where he or she could be safe, from the long-swaying, terrible clutch of its trunk. The doors of houses were slammed and barred with feverish haste. The stalls were forsaken. There was one simultaneous cry of terror and agony. I don't know what came over me; with a sudden superhuman strength I ran, with Bapuji in my arms, and dashed my whole weight against a fast-closing door. It yielded to my violent pressure, and I dashed in and fell, myself and Bapuji, on the pial inside the gate.

I didn't remember anything else for sometime, and when I came to myself I felt two little arms tightly wound round my neck and I saw Bapuji's face white with fear and terror, and with eyes closed, she was murmuring, 'Kunju mama, Kunju mama, Kunju mama, the elephant.'

I pressed her to my fast-beating heart; looked out and saw the elephant, trumpeting through the street in pain and madness. It was horrible to see it. I watched its movements fascinated and with a strange feeling of awe and interest. A few minutes that seemed like hours to us passed and then the elephant suddenly ran away into the empty forsaken temple; then a few more courageous than the others ran and closed the temple doors, and we were safe. I took up the unconcious Bapuji in my arms and with a palpitating heart ran home. I don't know how and when I reached home, but I never stopped on the way to take breath. I ran on and on till I was inside my house, and I don't remember what happenned immediately afterwards.

I laid the unconscious child on the bed. It took several minutes to revive her, and when she opened her eyes, we met a wild staring gaze. I caught her hand and felt it burning. Bapuji had a terrible fever through the shock of her fright. I gazed at my father and my mother, and they gazed back at me; we couldn't speak. We sent for the doctor. He was a kind and good man. He felt her pulse and her heart and he turned to us a face of alarm and pity. I couldn't bear his look. 'Oh God!' I raved with fury and ran to strike the doctor. But he held me firmly but kindly and seated me in a chair. 'Oh God! Is it true? How can I bear it?' I shouted in agony and clutched her hand and wetted it with my tears.

A message was sent to Mr Muthuswami Aiyar. Ah! it tears my heart to think of how they came, *she* came, her hair and saree dishevelled, mad with grief and agony and fell at Bapuji's bedside and sobbed in her great sorrow, . . . Oh!

Suddenly a terrible fury seized her. She turned round to me, madness in her eyes. 'You wretch, you killed her! Why did you take her away from me? To kill her! You murderer, you the most horrible of mankind, you monster!' She seized a broom that was near by, and thrashed me with it till the blood spurted out from my body; then she cursed me, cursed me to go to hell, and suffer the most horrible tortures imaginable; she called upon the gods to blast my life. She accused me of stealing her child's affections, she called me a sorcerer.

I bore the blows in silence. For I knew that I deserved them. I don't blame her, for the anger of a bereaved mother is sacred.

Bapuji lay lingering for three days. I sat near her always.

Now and then she would get fits of conciousness, but they went away as soon as they came. Her body always was burning with fever. Her eyes were open but there remained the indescribable fright in them. She would exclaim suddenly: 'The elephant! Kunju mama, hold me in your arms; oh, the elephant, it comes, it comes.' Shriek after sriek of fear, and she would clutch the counterpane . . . horror, hell!

She raved and then she dwelt on the pleasant days we had together; she would suddenly burst into a song, she would suddenly laugh and then become serious. I watched her silently, the tears trickling down my eyes, her hand in mine, and thus two days passed.

Suddenly, at about four o'clock on the morning of the third day, we noticed a lull in her raving. I bent over her, with my heart in my mouth. I saw that she was sleeping, with a soft smile on her lips. I turned to the doctor who was standing at my side, eagerly and with a sort of defiance. But, ah, he shook his head and a tear trembled in his eyes.

'She is fast sinking,' he murmured. 'In two more hours it will be over.'

That crushed me. I broke down crying, 'Bapuji, Bapuji!'

My sobs woke her up. Her glorious eyes opened and a look of understanding came into them. 'Why, Kunju mama, why are you crying?' she enquired in a weak voice.

I pressed her hand to my cheek and gazed at her.

'Bapuji are—are you, an—g—g—ry with me?' I sobbed.

'For what?' There was surprise in her weary voice and on her tired face.

'For tak—ing—you—to—to—the—elephant?'

Still there was surprise on her face. 'Why, no! Why—should—I be angry, it—is the—elephant—which ran—after us! Why should—I be angry—with—you?'

I was calmed; at least *she* didn't despise me, reproach me, although the others did. I gazed at the fast-sinking child with the tears rolling down my cheeks.

All at once she held out her hand. 'Take me—in your—arms—Kunju mama.'

I did. I gathered her wasted form tenderly in my arms and held her close to me.

'Kunju mama!'

'Yes, my child.' I replied eagerly. Every word of hers wasprecious.

'Sing me to sleep!' she said faintly.

God! Can you imagine it—my reader? I ask you, can you imagine my torture? I sang. I don't know how I did, with the choking sobs and the hot tears and the lump in my throat and in my heart, you can imagine how I sang.

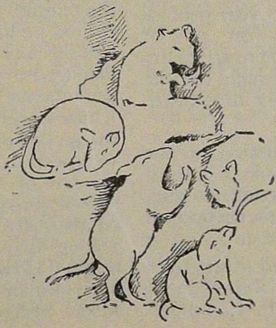
She lay passively in my arms, smiling, and then suddenly her whole frame shook, her arms tightened round my shoulders with a sudden and last strength, her beautiful glorious eyes rolled and closed, and she sank into her last sleep, the smile staying on her face, calm, serene, and happy, lit with a heavenly glow. I fainted away.

There is little more to tell. We went to the burial ground and burnt Bapuji. That very night, it might have been midnight, I suddenly sat up. Something like a spirit took possession of me. I felt that I couldn't stay there without her. At once I tore my clothes and ran away from home, into the sheltering darkness . . .

That is all. Two years have passed. People call me mad. Do you think I am? Don't you pity me?

Do I feel calm? Yes, that is so. I feel so, this communication, this unburdening of the heart does some good.

The night is drawing near, and I feel a strange happiness. She will come to me to-night—I am sure of it, I almost know it—to put her arms round me, to comfort me with her sublime hopes of the arrival of the day when we shall both be together, never, never, to part again. Oh, Bapuji, my darling!



THE MIRACLE

By T. J. RANGANATHAN

NATURALLY enough our conversation turned around the possibility of miracles; for a short while ago we were informed of the village priest Thondaman's decision to carry *Chandana Kavadi* to the temple of Lord Subrahmanya that year.

'It is not possible, my friend,' exclaimed Vaitha, with a loud chuckle. 'It is not possible for miracles to happen at the instance of an uncivilised rustic like our Thondaman. I don't believe it.'

'Why not?' flared up Kitta. 'We have grown sceptical over everything, great and small. Our whole outlook on life is distorted and charged with a spirit of Godlessness. We claim omniscience for ourselves and regard our fore-fathers as a pack of fools. This attitude is rapidly spoiling us and, unless we get rid of it at once, it is bound to ruin us to the very core of our being—in a generation to be sure. Your disbelief in this matter is the result of such an attitude.'

'But, do you really believe in the possibility of clay changing into fragrant sandal and thus revealing the power of man's devotion?' I interposed. 'Do you think in all seriousness that our Thondaman is capable of performing such wonders as that?'

'As a matter of course, I do,' affirmed Kitta. 'I do, because last year pebbles were transformed into sweet bits of sugar-candy by him, and there are many eye-witnesses who will vouch for the truth of that. Why not clay into sandal, this year?'

We continued the discussion in the same vein for a considerable length of time, but we could not come to any agreement as to the phenomenon of miracles.

From all that Vaitha said it appeared that he thought it was an impossibility for miracles to happen, with this difference that they would happen in times and places separated by very big distances from our own. Kitta's point of view was quite different. The implication of all that he expressed was that miracles might happen at the beck and call of every Tom, Dick, and Harry provided he was content with being himself a fool and superstitious enough to believe in all things that pass for old and hoary. Here let me assure the reader that my position had nothing to do with either of these two attitudes. On the other hand, I differed from both and controverted all they said. But I have to confess that all the dialectical faculties I picked up from learning and experience proved unequal to the task of convincing my friends of the absurdity of their respective positions or the soundness of my own view, that mircles of the type they believed in could never happen, neither in the past, nor in the present, nor in the future, whatsoever the place and circumstances may be.

For aught we knew of him Thondaman was a very good chap, with an excellent character. He had done many a kindly act by way of help to individual villagers and to the village as a whole. His piety, philanthropic nature, absolute unselfishness were too well-known. He had great devotion for Muruga, the presiding deity of the local temple. Year after year, he was amassing wealth for the temple, on which, as a matter of course, he had neither any sort of control nor any other right, for it was being managed by a committee of trustees, in accordance with the Hindu Religious Endowment Act. There was nothing in the record of his antecedents, as far as we knew, to show against him. He was a native of the self-same village; had stayed abroad for long years and returned about five years ago to settle in the village—a pious devotee of the local deity. How could anybody believe in such a man playing a hoax? Unthinkable. Still my mind resisted the idea of

miracles being performed by anybody, however pure and simple he might be.

The appearance of Kitta's sister put an end to our discussion.

'Brother, won't you get me the music book I told you of for a week's use?'

Kitta looked at me and smiling, remarked: 'My sister is going to be a very big musician one of these days. She is bent upon learning all the songs in the world. Can't you ask your wife to lend her music book for a week or so?'

'By all means,' I replied, 'provided your sister sings a piece now.'

'What piece?' asked the girl, a little abashed at the demand by me, her prospective brother-in-law.

'Any piece you like.'

'A national song?'

'All the better.'

She sang a Tamil song set to a Hindustani tune; but it was only as much a national song as a piece of charcoal would ever be a lump of shining gold. Seeing my disapproval of it from the expression of my face, Kitta asked me: 'You don't like it?'

'I don't,' was my cold reply.

'Because of the theme?'

'Because of the theme, because of the text, and more than all, because of an innocent girl singing it.'

'What is wrong about it?'

'Firstly, the theme is a cold-blooded murder; secondly, the text is scandalously bad; and thirdly, the composer seems to be a muddy-headed vulgar fellow, for he has made the murder a handiwork of God.' I did not finish.

'Oh, it is a matter of disbelief again!' exclaimed Kitta.

The song was about a sensational murder committed in Bengal some seven years ago. At that time it was known as the mysterious Lala murder, and the case was given up by the police as undetected. The failure of the police coupled with the grim circumstances attendant upon the crime made the innocent folk create a halo around it and regard the event as one in which the Almighty had a hand. Why should I believe? But, Kitta would not leave me at that. He thought that my scepticism would be dispelled if we would closely watch our Thondaman this year when he carried his *Chandana Kavadi* throughout its progress to assure ourselves that he did not do any showman's trick. I accepted my friend's suggestion simply because I did not want to disoblige him.

(2)

The initial ceremonies in connection with the carrying of the *Kavadi* took place on the stepflight of a tank. A very good crowd was assembled. When all chanting and singing was over, Thondaman waded into the water with an empty pot in his hand, and filled it with clay gathered from under the water in the presence of all. We went very near him and saw the clay with our own eyes, and assured ourselves that there was no trick. After filling it to the brim, he covered the mouth of the pot with a thick piece of cloth and tied it fast to it. Then he immersed the pot into the water to clean it of the dirt clinging to it while in the process of dipping and filling. He next brought it ashore to fasten it to the *Kavadi*. The piper piped, the drummer drummed, and the people assembled cried a lusty 'Arohara!' Thondaman appeared to be possessed by the spirit of God; he jumped and danced in wild frenzy. After a while he lifted the *Kavadi* to his shoulders and scampered off like a scared rat. We followed him to the temple.

Why should I tire the reader with the tedious narration of the ceremonies that took place in the temple? Suffice it to say that after their due performance the pot was opened and, lo! there was no more clay in it, but first-rate sandal instead, sweetly-perfumed, soft, cool, heavenly. It was distributed to us all.

'His whole bearing showed his mental peace and joy born of his having come out of an ordeal unscathed.'

'What did I tell you, Kanna ?' shouted Kitta and strutted like a peacock. I did not know what to reply.

I looked at Thondaman. Yes, he seemed as good as ever. His whole bearing showed his mental peace and joy born of his having come out of an ordeal unscathed. There was no affectation in it, no, nothing. This was the impression I carried with me about the incident. I did not, could not think that he dissembled.

But my mind was not at rest; it went on in an eternal monologue of questions, doubts, more questions, dragging itself on thorns and tenterhooks. It was quite true that I did not know how to account for this particular occurrence. I expressed my difficulty to Kitta. He simply pitied me, called me an utter incorrigible.

(3)

The next day I went to Kitta's house for a formal discussion of the terms of marriage of his sister with my brother. The discussion over, he took me to the tank to bathe. I had accepted his invitation for dinner.

Filled with joy at the thought of the prospective alliance, I went on cutting jokes with him. Incidentally I told him that we would not allow his sister, after the marriage, to go on singing such pieces as the one about the Lala murder.

This unintentional remark of mine caused him much irritation for, he said: 'In that case you may take it that my sister is not going to marry your brother.'

Just at the moment when I was brooding over this serious reply of my friend, I was hit by something from under the water. Without answering him I ducked under and felt with my hands at the bottom, and fished out a pot. It was discovered to be filled with mud!

Well might I have cried out Eureka with that philosopher of yore, for that pot explained the 'miracle' which happened there the previous day. It became quite plain that Thondaman had already laid a pot filled with sandal at the bottom of the tank without anybody's knowledge; when the *Kavadi* ceremony was going on he had simply changed it under the water for the one filled with mud.

As soon as we discovered the trick, Kitta and I fumed with rage against Thondaman, the arch-hypocrite who cheated so many people. We started for his house at once, with wet clothes, in the middle of our bath, to tell him that his tricks would do no more, and, unless he made proper amends for the fraud he committed, he would be handed over to the police.

When we reached his house we found that no more was there Thondaman our village priest, but there was Thondaman the prisoner in the custody of policemen, having been arrested on a charge of murder committed long ago and known as the "Lala Murder of Bengal".

I looked at Kitta.

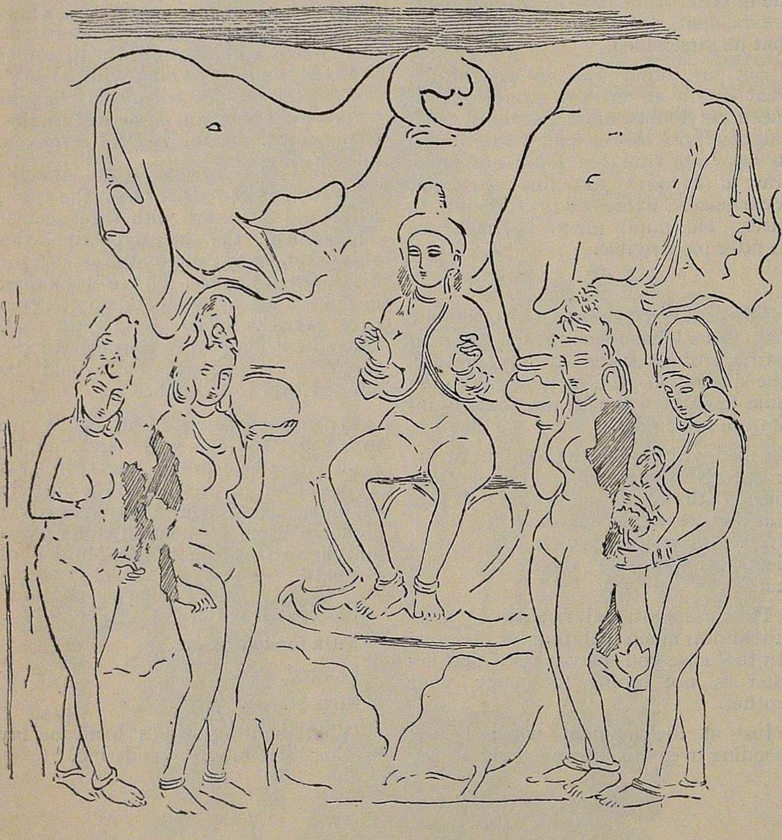
Kitta looked at me.

I stared.

Kitta stared.

What about his sister's hand for my brother? He is still considering.

From Mahabalipurm.



DRAUPADI'S SARI

An episode of the Mahabharat days re-enacted in the twentieth century

By RAJENDRA PRASAD SAKSENA

IT would be revealing no secret in saying that from every college-boy's point of view the most important functions are those in which girl students from the sister colleges—their so-called sisters—are invited. On the one hand the best suits are displayed and on the other there is an array of brightest colours in saris.

Ramu had just returned to his room in the hostel from one such function, when Gopal came in, and before they had talked many other things. Ramu could not help saying, 'I say, did you notice that girl in the violet sari—the one who was wearing pearl eardrops? How perfectly lovely she was!'

'What of her?' enquired Gopal not quite catching the significance of what Ramu had said.

'Oh, nothing,' replied Ramu feeling rather disappointed, adding, 'If you had noticed you must have seen that she was so often looking at me, with such a soft look. After the lecture I tried to have a word with her but all the girls in a body moved to the lorry and were off. How I wish I could meet her! But these d—d rules of the Girls' Hostel are so stringent . . . '

Gopal heard on what was more of a soliloquy, very much amused; he was still more amused when, after blurting out the whole affair (if affair it was at all) Ramu had asked him to promise secrecy for what he had told him and 'to tell it to no living man.' Gopal knew Ramu to be one who could always be relied upon to provide some fun, and more so when that great genius of the hostel, Naim, was at hand. So Gopal bid Ramu a 'good night and happy dreams' and left him to muse over his newly-discovered love; he then proceeded to Naim's room.

'Hello, Ramu!' It was no other than Naim himself, come within a few moments of Gopal's exit.

'Nothing doing,' replied Ramu rather morose.

'Well, old boy, you deserve the heartiest congratulations,' said Naim.

'What for?' asked Ramu looking rather puzzled.

'O you rogue,' said Naim with a sly smile. 'You want to conceal it from me. Wasn't every student present in the hall jealous of you when you were exchanging glances with that paragon of beauty, Miss K—?'

'Miss K—? So, her name is Miss K—,' interrupted Ramu visibly delighted.

'Why, do you mean to say that you do not know her? Well, well, don't try to hoodwink me,' said Naim assuming great seriousness.

Ramu had to protest pretty strongly to persuade Naim to believe that it was the first time that he had seen her and that he had only learnt her name from him.

'So it was a case of love at first sight,' said Naim with a meaningful nod of his head. And then, Ramu intimated to Naim also all that he had disclosed to Gopal and more in the same strain. Curiously enough he took from Naim too the promise to reveal, all that he had said to 'no living man' and expressed his inability to proceed further because of the stringent Girls' Hostel rules, with a deeper sigh than when he narrated it to Gopal.

Naim affected to chastise him saying, 'You are a very simple chap and it must have been for your 'innocence' that Miss K—had fallen in love

with you, of all the boys present! Do you really suppose that all the Girls' Hostel rules that one hears so much about are followed in fact? I thought that every boy of this college knew that they are observed more only in their breach I am sure it would be the easiest of things for you to enter into correspondence with Miss K—.'

Till now Ramu had only *read* of romance, or had *seen* it on the screen. The idea of his own becoming the hero of a real, live romance was too tempting for him to miss because of possible risks that he might be running to achieve the 'herodom.' So it was settled that Naim would arrange to get Ramu's first letter delivered to Miss K—. Ramu offered to write it in Naim's presence then and there but Naim would hear of no such thing. He considered it too ungentlemanly to pry into the affairs of 'a respectable girl like Miss K—' and asked Ramu not to disclose the contents of the letter even to him (Naim). At last the proposed letter was delivered to Naim duly sealed in an envelope.

The next day at dusk when Ramu was coming back to the hostel from the playground, a bearded *Chaprasee* delivered a letter of him. He received a very handsome *bakshish*. Ramu then ran to his room, switched on the light and opened the envolope. It was no other than a reply from Miss K—. Therein she had expressed her inability to see him at present because of the 'stringent rules' but promised to do so at the first opportunity. But she had also asked him to send her some momento of his which might serve to remined her of him. Ramu was very much puzzled at what to send to her and in the end decided to consult his old friend Naim. In addition to a very nice writing-pad Naim also made him purchase a few dozens of the best chocolates and other confectionery to be sent to Miss K—the next day when the bearded *Chaprasee* presented himself at dusk.

The acknowledgment was also received in due course, and what was more it was written on a leaf from the same writing-pad that he had sent to her only the other day as a present. Thus their correspondence went on for more than a month, full of hottest love on both their parts. In every other letter that Ramu received, there was a demand for something or other, on the pretext that the hostel rules did not permit girls to purchase things from outside. More often the request was to send edibles—chocolates, pastries, cakes etc. Needless to say that Ramu always executed the behests, however much he might have had to suffer afterwards because of having spent from his not too abundant monthly allowances. In every letter Ramu was pleading with her to meet him and every time he met with some ingenious excuse. At last when he was almost on the point of exasperation he did get the good news from her that it would be possible for her to see him the next day when she would be allowed to get out as her brother was coming to see her. But the same letter also contained a request to him to send her a black sari, so that it might be possible for him to recognise her even from a distance. She had arranged that she would be walking in the park at about nightfall with her brother and that Ramu should follow them keeping at a respectable distance, and when and only when her brother had gone away, he should approach her.

Sleep was impossible for Ramu on that night; at least he could not himself say how long he slept and dreamed dreams of her or was awake and indulged in thoughts of her. Both the states seemed so much alike that he himself could hardly distinguish between the two. The next day Ramu returned from the college very early; but so did Naim, Gopal, and a few others. After their first letter was exchanged, Ramu had begun to be secretive from every body—even from Naim himself but nobody seemed to mind it either. But it was different to-day; when Ramu was in his room with the doors bolted they would all knock incessantly till he had to

open the door and was discovered dressing with meticulous care.

'Where are you going to?' they all asked him persistently. But, how could he give it out? In the end he had to admit that he was going to see his mother. But then all of them persisted in accompanying him; so that he may not have all the *laddoos* that his mother would give him, to himself. By his own inadvertence Ramu had landed himself in a dilemma; and then, he was getting late for his tryst. However in the end, like a good 'friend' that Naim had always been to Ramu, he came to his rescue. Through his intervention a compromise was effected: the terms of which were that Ramu was to treat them all with *laddoos* on his return and should pay for the seats of all of them in the cinema; and on their part they would leave him to go alone to see his 'mother'.

Ramu almost ran to the park. Those mischievous boys had made him late and what would Miss K—think! Dusk was falling.

But he felt very much relieved when on just entering the park, his keen eyes could spot a girl in a black sari walking at a distance with her back towards him with a young man who was holding a bicycle in his hand. There was of course no mistaking the girl. Could he miss *the* sari which he had purchased only the day before and selected it after visiting every decent shop in the city as the 'best black sari available'; he could recognize it in a thousand. Then he walked on behind them, cursing the brother as he took his sister round about and round about through the intricate byways of the big park. Ramu guessed from the back of the brother, which was all that he could see of him, that he was rather familiar with the man. But of course Miss K—could be the sister of one whom he knew. It was all quite natural. In the end when it was almost nightfall, the brother did ride his bicycle and was off. Then it was Ramu's turn to approach her. She was standing in the shade of a tree. His heart gave a flutter as he approached her. But at the last moment he became nervous and could not speak a word.

'Darling,'—he atlast blurted out taking courage in both hands. But she would not speak and kept her face away from him. Then it was that Ramu remembered that she had asked him in her letter to bring all the letters that she had so far sent to him; so that, she had explained, 'it might be easy for her to recognise him.' He took out the parcel from his pocket and handed it over to her. But almost before the packet had changed hands, there appeared from behind the bushes a human form who snatched it from Miss K—and threw it in the tank near by.

'Hello, Ramu! What is this?' It was Naim.

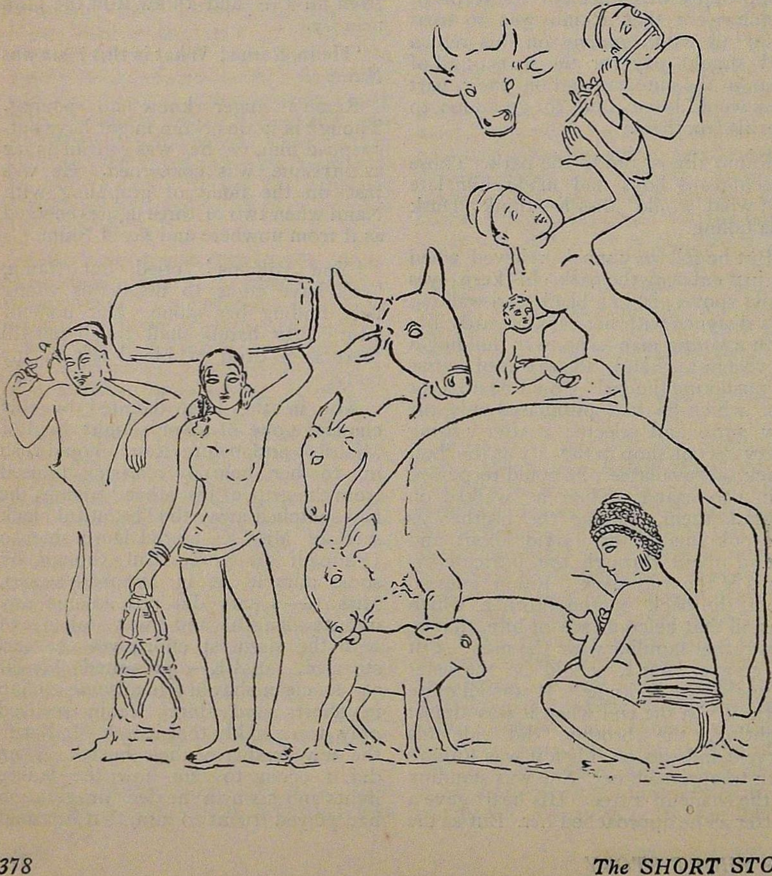
Ramu's anger knew no bounds. Though in brains Naim might have outstripped him, yet he was so frail as far as physique was concerned. He was just on the point of grappling with Naim when two or three figures energed as if from nowhere and saved Naim.

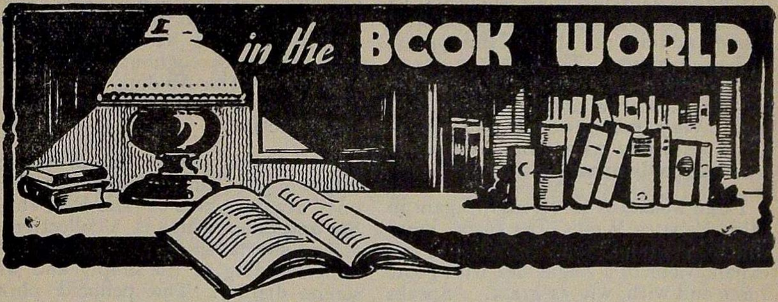
'You ruffians!' cried out Ramu, 'you have come to insult this young lady finding her alone. But none of your dirty hands shall touch her till there is a drop of blood left in my body.'

Not in the least daunted by this challange one of them caught hold of Miss K— and before Ramu could rush up to her help by releasing himself from the grip of his other 'friends,' he had snatched away the 'beautiful black sari' of Miss K—as did Dushashan to Draupadi of yore. But though by some miracle as in Draupadi's sari, Miss K—'s sari did not assume any infinite length and was taken of with the slightest effort, yet the sari stripped, Miss K— presented herself as a clean-shaven handsome chap in shorts and shirt! Ramu realized only too quickly that it was Mr Karim the new fresher of their hostel. Then did it occur to him how the fading lights and his own heated imagination had played truant to him, that he could

not recognize one whom he had been seeing almost every day for the last two or three months. All his hopes and aspirations being vanquished at one stroke Ramu threatened to report all of them to the principal. But, on what evidence? All the letters that he had received had already gone into the lowest depths of the tank. And, about the *Chaprasee* with the big beard? Naim pulled out something from his breast pocket and sent it the same way that the letters had gone; it was a big beard. The *Chaprasee* minus beard required all the ingeunity of a Ramu to find out. As for the chocolates and confectionery —within a few minutes of thier being delivered to the bearded *Chaprasee* by Ramu, they always went to satisfy the palate of some of his hostel-mates!

From Mahabalipuram.





ENGLISH

Dead Man's House, by Halcott Glover (Dent, 7s. 6d.)

The Hands of Man, by Miss Marguerite Williams (Blackie, 7s. 6d.)

The Harsh Voice, by Miss Rebecca West (Cape, 7s. 6d.)

"*Six and Seven*," by Mrs Lorna Rea (Heinemann, 7s. 6d.)

Dead Man's House by the author of *Morning Pride* is indeed a tremendous surprise for 'here is,' as the publishers' note reads, 'a closely knit study of the "eternal triangle," but a study which takes fresh characters and works out their age-old problem in a most unconventional setting.' The characters of Man Michael, the delightful vagabond, of the world-weary doctor, Tom who begins to take a lifeful interest in life when he comes into contact with the vagabond, of the wildly brilliant Kate are very vitally distinct and the lives of the three in the house in Maida Vale, a picturesque yet sinister house move vitally and brilliantly as the characters themselves. Sex which is shut out declines to be shut out, and tragedy explodes suddenly and with the horror of a nightmare. But there is hope towards the end, that which comes within the limits of probability of a story; and because nothing suffers from an overemphasis the incidents move on coherently, maintaining their interest and importance from beginning to end of the novel. Mr. Glover's style is like raw silk; his matter has gained much strength from it and in *Dead Man's House* he has said something most original, most beautifully convincing.

And an unpleasant change is felt immediately when reading *The Hands of Man* for the style here is involved and the theme requires a subtler pen than Miss Marguerite Williams's. Michael Fraser, a medical student in his third year and Alan Lloyd, his friend are interested in tropical diseases with a spirit of research and agree between themselves to go, as soon as they have qualified, together to Central Africa to practise. But Michael meets with a motor accident and when on recovery a specialist tells him that there is serious injury to his optic nerve and he has only two more years of life, he has to give up the project of going to Africa. And in the church where a farewell service is given to those outgoing missionaries, medical and otherwise, he sees Audrey Strafford and is instantly attracted by her. 'Michael saw her beautiful—the fresh complexion, the large dark eyes that looked frank and fearless, the full lips well practised in smiles and laughter, the head with short, closely curling dark hair that gleamed when the light caught it, and the softly rounded figure already too frankly feminine to be called "boyish." One might have seen her the epitome of that youth which the critics ignore; modern youth with its wholesomemindedness, its courage, its larger

freedom and broader knowledge, and its rich heritage from men and women of vision and faith; to Michael she appeared herself alone.' There is the inevitable falling in love; sweet avowals of the young, alarms and misunderstandings. Very conventional and oftentimes painfully trite Miss Williams's novel can only appeal to the adolescent.

From weakness to strength again in Miss Rebecca West's *The Harsh Voice* which contains four novelettes, all exploitations of a single idea with great force and with wit as great. 'Speaks the harsh voice we hear when money talks, or hate, then comes the softest answer,' she quotes to support the title, but reading through the stories in which the incidents and characters are purely the crackles and colours of Miss West's single and overwhelming idea, the words leave in one a sense of supreme irrelevance. In the core of Hate, Love lies cooly and redolent of the roses of memory; Love cannot despise; it can only hate. And in these stories we hear very little of the harsh tone of Hate; the timbre throughout is light and amusing. 'The Abiding Vision' is as warm as love could be and is the best in the collection.

'. . . . this slow and subtle transmutation of good qualities to hard and evil ones' are the words of Mrs Rea, and in *Six and Seven* which is a collection of stories she has shown this sympathetic understanding of life simply and with serene dignity. The pellucid phrase reflecting always a perfect image, and the emotions faultlessly wrapped in the brilliance of their quality and degree, the stories make one linger over them; Mrs Rea's great gift becomes apparent when she reveals unerringly and with her clear-wrought words the power of a Superior Force that presides over the doings of man.

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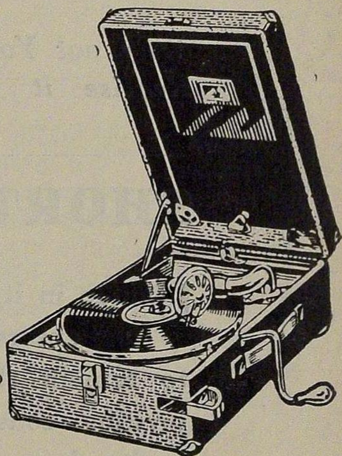

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